

A LONDON WEREWOLF IN AMERICA

Pat Cunningham

ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

To Warren Zevon, John Landis, and inspiration from unexpected places.

A LONDON WEREWOLF IN AMERICA

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Chapter 1

"Now, Roddy, it's not like you to be so glum. Cheer up. I'm sure you're going to love her."

Bloody doubtful. Roderick Chase—*never* "Roddy," thank you very much—wrinkled his nose and growled under his breath, first at his Aunt Letitia's never-ending perkiness, then at his first good whiff of America. Granted, London's air was no fresh spring bouquet much of the time, but this! Even for an airport, it made his eyes water, and he'd thought himself inured to the stench of monkey. He didn't even try to muffle his sneeze. "I don't suppose she lives in the country?" he muttered.

"She lives with her family in Fairmount Park, but she's getting an apartment soon."

Roderick's nose wrinkled further.

Aunt Letty fixed a scowl on him. "Don't you make that face at me. Your mother went to a lot of trouble to arrange this meet."

"Ah, yes. Always on the lookout for her favorite son's best interests."

"Yes," Aunt Letty said shortly, "she is. New blood's always good for the pack, and it's long past time you were properly mated."

"I'm quite capable of finding my own mate, you know."

"Oh, we know. Found yourself a dozen in the last six months, I've been told. Usually in pubs. *Human* pubs."

"I thought you just said new blood's good for the pack."

"That depends on the blood, and you know it." She took his arm to haul him off to baggage claim, weaving them expertly through the mass of illsmelling humans. "Your mother wants you mated and settled. The sooner the better, I say."

"And we all jump when the Queen Mum yips." Which wasn't so far off the mark, he was forced to bitterly concede. His mother, Bernadette Chase, had ruled the pack with an iron paw since well before the death of his father. No one, not even Roderick, dared raise hackles in front of her. Playing the happy submissive had grown more difficult over the last several years. Rank as this Yank air was, he found it easier to breathe than the close, tensionfilled atmosphere of Chase Manor, although he felt it could do with a lot less monkey-whiff.

A fat ape in a straining business suit nearly ran him down in his desperate lumber toward the boarding gate. Roderick didn't know whether to snarl or shudder. "So what am I supposed to do with this bitch? Submit to the whole arranged mating, or just get a litter on her?"

"You watch your tone, puppy. I'm not afraid to nip you in public." Aunt Letty flashed a fang to show she meant it. "Coraline comes from a fine old pack. Impeccable pedigree. No human blood in *her* veins."

"She sounds delightful. Perhaps we ought to show her at Crufts."

Aunt Letty reached up and cuffed him on the scruff of the neck. "There'll be no more of that talk. You'll marry this girl and there's the end of it." She stared about, her nose working as hard as her eyes. "Oh dear, where's Eugene got to? He should have joined us by now. Ah well, let's go fetch your bags."

She snatched his claim ticket out of his hand and trotted toward the carousel. Roderick lagged behind. Inside his expensive, restrictive suit, he was seething. An arranged marriage, in this day and age. With some Yank, no less. Lycaon bite it, who did they think they were dealing with? He was alpha!

But so was his mother, and some alphas were more alpha than others, as his sister Tamra was fond of reminding him. One did not defy one's pack leader unless one was prepared to face the consequences, possible death being foremost. Which is how he'd come to stand alone in a crowded airport, hemmed in by monkeys and their noxious stench in bloody Philadelphia. Why couldn't his mother have found him a she in a more civilized country?

This is punishment, he decided. Her way of forcing him to show throat. All right, perhaps he deserved a cuff or two. He liked his romps. He'd never tried to hide the fact. However, he'd been discreet. No lovers sent to hospital, no half-human whelps left behind, no cries of *werewolf* to come back and haunt the pack. If the girls themselves didn't object—and none had to date—then where was the harm? Better a human she than some protected daughter of the pack. The monkeys howled just as loudly and enthusiastically as any were. Or perhaps the Queen Mum expected her get to stay celibate? He shuddered and growled at the thought.

Well, Bernadette Chase was back home in England, and Aunt Letty was verbally tearing out the throat of the hapless baggage clerk, and cousin Eugene had yet to return, so there was no one to stop him from visually feasting on the bounty laid out before him.

Say what you would about humans, they bred themselves some fine, attractive shes, even here in the Colonies. Like that one in the flowered scarf, with legs longer than the Amazon. Or the blonde at the ticket counter, who kept flicking glances his way. Or the redhead alone in the seating area, perched on the edge of her plastic chair, who had placed a shallow clay bowl in her lap and was currently starting a fire in it.

Roderick blinked and narrowed his eyes. She wasn't actually-

Yes, she was actually. The redhead had taken a white stump of candle out of a shapeless knit shoulder bag big enough to hold India. She murmured to the candle, and it burst into flame. With this she lit the scrap of parchment she'd placed in the bowl. A little wisp of purplish smoke spiraled up. She bent low over the bowl. He saw her lips move.

Now monkeys, the Yank breed especially, had been known to do some pretty queer things, but this was new even to Roderick. Intrigued, he ambled over for a closer look.

He crept up behind her on silent hunter's feet. His keen ears picked up an unfamiliar language, similar to Gaelic but oddly accented. He risked a final, closer step and walked right into the scent of the smoke.

It wasn't at all the type of odor he associated with burning paper. Tart and sweet at once, it conjured up images of thick, dark forests, a belly full of fresh-killed venison and, inexplicably, the color violet. Suddenly he felt invincible, as if nothing on earth could do him harm.

All this lasted only a second. Then the woman blew a kiss into the fire, murmured, "Be safe," and snuffed the flame. The smoke billowed up in a final burst, straight up his sensitive nose. He couldn't stop his sneeze.

The woman gasped and nearly dropped her bowl. She twisted around in her seat. The most striking cobalt eyes he'd ever gazed into widened at him. Her full and perfect lips formed a full and perfect O. Would those eyes darken during love, he wondered? What cries would she make? What cries would he make in response when those long-fingered delicate hands took their wicked liberties with his flesh?

His fantasy spoke, in low, husky tones. "Oh geez. I'm not a terrorist, honest."

The left side of his mouth quirked upward. "Of course not." He nodded at the bowl and its smoldering contents. "So why dispose of the evidence?"

"It's not evidence of anything. It's a—" She cut herself off. Her eyes got thin. So they *could* darken. Fascinating. "You're not airport security."

"No," he admitted with a graceful shrug. "Merely a concerned citizen."

His first concern at this point was how best to bring down this delectable prey. This involuntary trip across the pond had just become infinitely more interesting.

* * * *

Concerned citizen, Darinda thought. Yeah, right. And she was Morgain Le Fay. He wasn't even an American citizen either if that accent was for real. She gave him the automatic once-over. His suit did nothing to disguise a trim, athletic build. His face sported a long nose, square, powerful jaw, and hair as black as Scranton coal and thick as an animal's pelt. It went well with his tawny eyes. An alarm went off in the back of her head. What did she know about yellow eyes?

"You're not from around here," she said. "Just get in?"

"Twenty minutes ago." He glanced around quickly, as if checking for someone. Darinda started to rise. Instantly he moved around the seat to offer his hand. "Roderick Chase. London, England."

"Darinda Lowell. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania."

A London Werewolf in America

She didn't take his hand. Instead she peered at it as if passing judgment. He beamed his most disarming smile at her. "I assure you, I don't bite. Not right off."

Still skeptical, she shifted the bag and the bowl into her left hand and extended her right. She accepted Roderick's hand and rose gracefully to her feet.

And the world slid sideways.

Oh crap. Her truth touch had just kicked in on her again. Mr. Merry Olde throbbed with primal, predatory power, more than ready and willing to claim all within his line of sight. Like her, for instance.

She knew in her head she was holding his hand, but her eyes saw a paw in her palm. Looking up, she found herself eye to yellow eye with a great black wolf in a suit. His muzzle twitched, and he cocked his head slightly to one side. His jaws parted.

"Is something the matter?" the wolf said.

Darinda snatched her hand away. The wolf snapped back to human. Her bag slid off her shoulder and nearly knocked the bowl from her hand. In frantically transferring the bowl from left hand to right she lost her grip on the shoulder bag. It dropped off her forearm and plopped at her feet. Small plastic vials, a lipstick, a handful of business cards and a John Grisham paperback scattered across the floor.

Roderick stared at her, puzzled. Darinda backed a step, placing the bag between them. The yellow eyes made sense now. "You're a werewolf," she blurted.

His nostrils flared. Hecate's bra, he was actually sniffing her. "You're a witch."

"Yes," she said proudly, and waited for The Look: raised brows, pursed lips, naked skepticism. Dropping the W-bomb on strangers usually provoked that reaction.

Instead this intercontinental were merely shrugged broad shoulders. "I suppose that explains the bonfire."

"The—? Oh. Right." She secured her grip on the bowl. "Protection spell. My brother's plane just took off. I wanted to make sure he gets home safely. It's not easy casting spells in a public place these days. They think you're trying to burn the building down. You're taking all this rather well." "Your being a witch? We do have them in England, you know. Old hags, mostly. Not young and lovely. You don't object to my being a were?"

"I've dealt with my share of wolves." Maybe not as smooth as this one, but with intentions just as transparent. She cut eye contact and knelt to clean up the spill from her bag. Instantly he crouched to assist her. "So what brings you to Philadelphia?"

"Nothing important." He reached for a vial. She swept it deftly out of his reach and back into her bag. Their fingers nearly brushed. She skillfully avoided that as well. "Don't touch the vials," she warned. "They're not for amateurs."

"What's in them?"

"Herbs, mostly. I don't want to get them mixed up. Some of the combinations can be volatile."

She groped for the business cards. He helped her gather them up. He paused to examine one. "Set A Spell, South Street. You're the shop's resident witch?"

"And the owner." She grabbed the card from him. Not quickly enough. This time their fingers did touch. The wolf popped into existence again, his interest blatantly sexual. Her body responded with a shiver of reciprocation. Bad body, Darinda scolded it. Lusting after a werewolf, even a sexy British one, was not in the cards for a witch. Talk about your volatile combinations.

"I'd love to see your establishment," he said. "And the rest of your lovely city. Perhaps you'd consent to show me around."

He wasn't quite panting, and neither was she, but if he kept inching closer to her that would change in seconds. Get onto another subject, fast. "Does Big Alex know you're in town?"

He paused in his relentless inching. "Who?"

"Big Alex. The King Wolf of Philadelphia. No outside were sets a paw on his turf unless he okays it first." She put some frost in her voice. "We don't want any trouble here. If he hasn't given permission—"

"Arrangements were made on my behalf. I'm to stay with a local branch of our pack. I'm sure your 'Big Alex' has been properly alerted."

"Got family in the city, then? Whereabouts?"

He growled under his breath. "Bite it, Aunt Letty's mentioned it a million times. Fairlane Park? Something like that."

"Fairmount Park?"

"Yes, that's it." She'd scooped the last of the spillage into her bag and was about to rise. He cupped her elbow and helped her to her feet. He barely stopped himself from licking his lips. "The house is called Meadowlands. I'm sure I can arrange a visit for you."

"That won't be necessary. If you have family here, they can show you around, so you won't be needing my services." She smiled, at the same time stepping just beyond his reach. "I've got to get back to work. Enjoy your stay in America, Mr. Chase."

She turned her back on him and walked away at a brisk stride that shouted finality. That's for you, Mr. English Werewolf, she thought. *If you have any sense, you'll let it drop.* She increased her pace to a trot, and marked the nearest exits. Not that she was worried, of course. Just to be on the safe side.

* * * *

Roderick growled again, this time low down in his throat and with a fierce smile framing it. This Yank monkey she stirred his blood as well as his hunting instincts. He would give her just enough of a lead, then run her down and—

"There you are." Aunt Letty bustled up with Cousin Eugene in tow. She thrust a leather suitcase at him while Eugene shrugged apologetic welcome. "Here's the one. The other's on its way to Istanbul. Those primates at the desk act like it's nothing. I'll 'nothing' them, the chattering—" She broke off and sniffed. Her expression darkened further. "Roddy! Have you been after the shes again?"

"Of course not." Roderick rolled his eyes at Eugene, the picture of innocence. Then yelped when Aunt Letty cuffed him. "What was that for?"

"For thinking you can lie to me. I've got a nose, puppy. Shame on you." She cuffed him again. "Barely off the plane and already hunting a romp. Detty was right to get you mated off. If you thought with your brain instead of your nether bits you wouldn't get in half so much mischief. From here on you'd better be on your best behavior, or else I'll put you on a leash."

"She will, too," Eugene said. "With a choke collar." He rubbed his neck, as if at unpleasant memories. "Can we go? It stinks in here."

"In a minute, dear. Roddy has to go through Customs. Assuming the similans don't muck that up, too. Come along, Roddy. Stay close."

She headed off. Roderick followed meekly. Now was not the time to bristle and bare teeth. Growing up under Bernadette's reign had taught him when to show throat and when to lunge for it. Eugene slipped into formation at his back, cutting off escape.

Neither could stop Roderick from looking around. The witch could not have gotten far, not in a crowd this packed.

Ah, there she was, along the wall, emptying the ashy contents of her bowl into a dustbin. That hair drew all eyes to her even in a mob this size. A rich, thick pelt, perfect for burrowing fingers in.

As if aware of his regard, she suddenly looked up. Her stare was drawn to him like a compass needle to the Pole. He grinned at her and winked. She couldn't possibly have seen either gesture, not at that distance, yet her posture stiffened. She turned abruptly and marched away, toward the distant exit. The lesser apes scurried out of her way, as they would before any alpha.

"Forget the monkeys," Eugene was saying. "You want fun, I know where to find fun. There's this place on Arch Street, lot'a vamps but they won't bother us. We can—"

Roderick let him blather on without paying any attention. He smiled to himself and slid his hand into his trousers pocket. His fingers curved around the business card he'd palmed while helping the witch gather her potions. The pad of his thumb rubbed along the embossed letters of her name, as it would soon rub the creamy richness of her skin. One did not escape a wolf so easily, not even a witch.

His smile broadened until fangs showed. Perhaps this trip to the Colonies would turn out well for him after all.

Chapter 2

Springsteen, Set A Spell's resident cat, acknowledged Darinda's return with a muffled *mrawr* that quickly spread into a yawn. Her assistant, Peri Gilmore, displayed far more animation. "Hey, that was quick. Paul, get off okay? Things have been like dead in here since lunchtime. I really think we should put that witch mannequin back out front. You know, the one from Halloween? The tourists love it. They take pictures alla time—"

"Sure, okay. But put it closer to the window instead of the door this time. That way they get the name of the store and the web site in the shot. Maybe great-aunt Tilly in Chester County would want to shop online." Darinda spoke without breaking stride. She aimed for the office in back and the Rolodex. "Do we still have the Wolf King's phone number?"

"Big Alex? Yeah, I think. Look under B. Does he even have a last name?"

"Here he is. Alexander Vittori." Filed under W, presumably for "wolf." Peri and the alphabet had only a nodding acquaintance. She punched in the first four numbers on her cell, then stopped because Peri was parked in the office doorway, peering at her suspiciously out of her huge thistledown eyes. "What?"

"What,' she says. You take your brother to the airport, then blast back in here and get on the phone to Philadelphia's head werewolf. Where, I ask myself, is the connection?"

Darinda sighed and related the Cliff's Notes version of her brief encounter with Roderick Chase. She deliberately left all the meat off the bones: his piercing yellow eyes, his deep voice, the fact he openly wanted her and she'd been teetering on the verge of wanting back. She did let slip he was English, and regretted it instantly when Peri *oooh'd*. "Did he have an accent? I *looove* the accent."

"Peri, he's a werewolf."

"So a werewolf's not allowed to have an accent?"

Goddess help them both. "Yes. He had an accent. Kind of Patrick Stewartish, but growly. And yes, before you ask, he had a lot more hair. As a matter of fact, he was quite the hunk."

"Ahhhh." Peri melted right there in the doorway. Darinda bit down on a snort. Peri was only twenty-one and still an apprentice witch. She had blonde hair cut in a pixie do, and pixie blood as well. She could be forgiven a melt now and then, even one over a were. Darinda, on the other hand, was five years older and a full enchantress, and fully committed to the solitude she'd decided was a witch's lot in life. Her melting days were well behind her. No matter how fascinating she found some Englishman's—make that English wolf's—burning topaz eyes.

"Dang, I wish you'd gotten his number. So you're calling Big Alex because...?"

"Because I need to know if Prince Hairy's legit. If he's not, Big Alex needs to hear about him. We can do without an intercontinental pack war. Remember that mess with the vampires?"

"Gawd yeah. We were weeks cleaning that up. Who knew vampires needed healing potions? I thought they just slept all day and woke up whole."

"Not when you shoot them with slugs dipped in holy water, they don't. I'm more concerned about the mortal reaction. Gang violence is gang violence. That includes pack violence. A couple werewolves snarl at each other, the mortals get antsy, the cops crack down, and everybody suffers. Especially us on the fringe. That's why I'm calling Big Alex."

"Gotcha." Peri tugged on her lower lip. "So. Did he tell you what hotel he's staying at?"

"Down, girl. He's staying with family. He mentioned Fairmount Park. I don't remember a Chase pack in Fairmount Park."

"No, that's the Meadows clan. Officer Charlie's pack."

"I don't recall Charlie saying he had English relatives. If it's true, though, and the guy checks out, he's all yours."

"Yay! Time to stock up on the flea powder." Peri danced back into the storefront. Darinda shook her head and dialed Big Alex.

Peri had customers—two somber teens looking for Goth accessories by the time Darinda emerged from the office. Peri sold the pair some silver medallions, threw in a free tube of eyeliner, and sent them on their gloomy way. She didn't try to disguise her relief at their departure. "Gawd, I hate Goths. They suck all the happy out of a room. So what did Big Alex say about my future husband?"

"Turns out he's legit. And engaged. He's here to be married."

Darinda leaned on the counter. She felt like something had been siphoned out of her. Where had the disappointment come from? He was just some guy. He wasn't even a human guy. He was a wolf in a pricy suit, making predator's eyes at her when he already had a bride waiting.

"What? That dog. How dare he be taken?" Peri stomped over to the windowsill where Springsteen lounged and consoled herself by stroking her familiar's fur. "I should have figured. You know what they say. The good ones are either married or demons."

"Forget him," Darinda said decisively. "You're right, he's a dog. He's not worth the time. There are plenty of other hot men with sexy accents out there."

"But none of them come in here. Maybe if we burned some incense. Dang, now I can't get weres out of my head. Do we have any steak-flavored?"

Pixies. Bright, but exhausting. "I should go over the inventory," Darinda said, and beat a strategic retreat.

* * * *

By the time Roderick rose the next morning, Aunt Letty already had his itinerary planned. A quick bite of breakfast, snatch a shower, then off to the city for sightseeing. One could not stay in Philadelphia, Aunt Letty insisted, without visiting the historic district. As if he gave a twitch of his tail where a gaggle of ragtag traitors had plotted rebellion against their rightful alpha. But then, King George hadn't been any higher up the evolutionary ladder, in Roderick's biased opinion. Now, if they'd had a true wolf on the throne—

Aunt Letty cuffed his neck. "Stop eyeing that girl," she hissed under her breath. "At least pretend you're paying attention."

He stifled his sigh, held his tongue, and wrenched his stare off the apes in the clingy skirt. Aunt Letty meant well, Lycaon bless her. She knew this situation was difficult for him and was doing all she knew to ease it. So he subjected himself to the park ranger's drone and joined the monkeys ooh-ing and ahh-ing over the Liberty Bell. *Bloody thing's got a crack in it,* he thought sourly.

Which pretty much summed up his life. He knew himself to be a highlydesirable catch, attractive to she-wolves and monkeys alike, from a wealthy and well-established pack. But the situation had become intolerable. He was nearly thirty. How was he to advance with the Queen Mum's paw on his neck and no intention of removing it?

Pack life did not foster alpha males, as there could only be one. Alphas had to make their own way, groom their own family of followers. For that he would need a mate as strong and aggressive as he. But a mate of *his* choosing, in his own time, not just because his mother said so. How big of a tuck-tail did she think him?

Or he could split from the pack and run lone, which meant a slow, excruciating death sentence to the social weres. Or...

He dipped his hand into his trousers pocket and patted the business card. In his other hand he carried the street map they'd been handing out at the visitors' center. The flirty brunette in faux Colonial garb had happily pointed out South Street, only five blocks from his current location. All he need do was slip Aunt Letty's leash.

Aunt Letty's hand clamped on his forearm. "Oh, this *is* a stroke of luck!" She dragged him away from the clustered monkeys toward a trim older woman in a tailored suit. "Nora! Nora, dear, what a delight to see you."

The woman's head turned toward them. Her nose worked, and her air of aloof condescension dissipated like mist. She smiled at them, displaying healthy teeth. "Letitia. What a pleasant surprise."

They greeted each other with a quick, rough hug that would have left bruises on an ape. Her eyes, a striking gold, fastened on him like the jaws of a trap. "This has to be Roderick."

"None other," Aunt Letitia said proudly. "Roddy, dear, this is Nora Duquesne, Coraline's mother."

He smiled and politely inclined his head. *Surprise, my hairy arse*. Of course they'd planned this. Provide the buyer with a preview of the merchandise. Was every were she on the planet conspiring against him? If she tried to inspect his genitals, he'd have to bite her.

Fortunately she restrained herself and settled for a visual appraisal. "I don't think Coraline will find fault," she said. "So, Roddy, how do you like Philadelphia?"

"After less than a day? It's a bit soon to pass judgment. I like to take my time, get to know a place."

He hoped she'd take the hint but no such luck. "I was supposed to meet Coraline for lunch, but something's come up at her job. She just phoned me. Too bad, she's so eager to meet you. Unless..."

"Yes?" Aunt Letty prompted, just as if this weren't rehearsed.

"Dinner," Nora Duquesne said firmly. "Tomorrow night, at Lupin Hill. Roddy and Coraline can get to know each other, and you and I can catch up. It's been too long since our packs intermingled. We should firm up the ties again."

"That sounds like a perfectly wonderful idea," Aunt Letty said. "Don't you think so, Roddy?"

"Absolutely," he said cheerfully. "If Coraline's half as lovely as her mother, I'm sure I'll adore her."

The women beamed at him and then, like most shes of most species, fell to chatting with each other and, for the moment, forgot him. He stood by patiently until they'd well enmeshed themselves in gossip then took a sly step to the rear. Then another. Seconds later he slipped himself in with a knot of university-agers headed across the street toward Independence Hall. Within minutes he'd covered a block, and Aunt Letty was nowhere in sight.

Step one accomplished. On to step two. He withdrew Darinda Lowell's business card, smiled at the printed address, and set off for South Street at a leisurely trot. Let the hunt begin.

Chapter 3

Darinda tapped her frowning lips with the edge of the ten of diamonds. This wasn't looking good at all.

Irritated, she gathered up the cards on the counter, patted them back into the deck, and shuffled. Before she dealt, she took a set of long, slow, cleansing breaths. It might not be Fate that had soured the cards. It might well be her own mood.

Business crawled along this morning. No big surprise. Her customers rarely got out of bed before noon or, in a lot of cases, sundown. To pass the time, she'd pulled out the deck of cards she used to tell fortunes. Instead of sensibly dealing herself a hand of Solitaire, she'd gone for a personal reading. It hadn't been encouraging. Neither had the two that followed.

Well, try, try again. She cut the deck, dealt from the top, and was not surprised when the Queen of Hearts led off. The Queen was her personal card. Next came a string of hearts and diamonds that took up half the circular deal. That string had prompted her initial frown. Hearts meant love, diamonds a binding chain. Fate meant to bind her to someone.

Darinda sniffed. She wasn't into bondage. She shuffled the deck again, a breach of convention she hoped would negate the repetitive reading.

No luck. The Jack of Clubs appeared, just as it had before. The Jack of Clubs always meant trouble. A line of clubs followed, broken here and there by hearts. Love persisted, but it would be a bumpy ride.

Then the final three. First the Ace of Spades. Darinda's mouth tightened. It didn't always have to mean death. It could just stand for radical change. The Ace of Hearts couldn't be as easily shrugged off. When taken in context with the rest of the reading it could only mean love triumphant, though heavily influenced by the black ace. Something was going to change, or die—either the love itself, or one of the lovers.

One of which, according to the reading, was her.

Not likely. She deliberately gave the deck yet another forbidden shuffle. *Let's see you come up this time.*

The King of Spades appeared at the top of the deck, just like the last three times. It sat expectantly in her palm, waiting for her to place it next to the Queen of Hearts. Instead she scraped up the cards with a snarl and swept the deck into the shoebox underneath the counter. These benighted readings were never accurate anyway.

Morosely she stared out the window at the passing foot traffic on South Street. Maybe it was just her imagination, but there seemed to be an awful lot of cuddling couples out there this morning. Young, not so young, in business suits and battered jeans and studded leather vests, men and women, boys and girls, a couple same-sex pairings, all of them looked disgustingly happy. Hecate's tits, it wasn't even that far into spring. April had barely got its feet wet on the calendar. In the long run, though, the time of year didn't really matter. The whole young man's, or young woman's, fancy cliché had never applied to her.

I'm a witch, she told herself. Witches were strong, independent, selfreliant. They didn't need men to feel complete. A lucky thing, since her witchiness usually scared the bejeebers out of any male she tried to date. Just mention witch and watch the eyebrows climb. Then she felt compelled to demonstrate. That brought on the sweat popping out on palms and cheeks, the stammered excuses and apologies for suddenly having to be elsewhere. A step up from pitchforks, torches and nooses, though not much of one.

Pity about the were. He hadn't been put off in the slightest. Of course, he'd only been after one thing, and anyone remotely female would have served his purpose. If she shut her eyes she could easily picture his face and the frank desire in it. She kept her eyes wide open. "Jerk," she muttered. Worse than a jerk. He was going to be married, for Hecate's sake. He was just another hound on the prowl. Besides, he had no way to find her. She'd seen the first and last of him at the airport, and that suited her just fine.

The door opened, and a mousy woman sidled her way in. She glanced nervously around the interior, her stare freezing on the stuffed bats fixed to the ceiling. Darinda moved, and the woman's focus darted to her. "Love potions?" she squeaked.

Darinda smiled broadly. "Right this way."

* * * *

The two monkey pups squinted their heavily-mascara'd eyes at the business card Roderick had given them then handed it back. "Right up the street," the boy said, pointing. His face had been powdered to a graveyard pallor, and he'd painted his lips a stark black. The girl had on less makeup but had dyed her hair pink. Both wore theatrical scowls and smelled like bean burritos. "You can't miss it."

Roderick thanked them brusquely and hurried up the walk. "Colorful" didn't begin to describe this place or the apes that populated it. He found it all too bright and sparkly, with building walls full of painted murals and mosaics crafted from what appeared to be shattered pop bottles. In such a gaudy environment, small wonder the monkeys dressed to call attention to themselves.

He wrinkled his nose at the abundance of leather, much of which clearly hadn't been laundered in ages. "Vampire" seemed to be the current fashion. Real vampires, Roderick surmised, probably shunned the area. One look at these apes in their faux Dracula garb and the bats would kill themselves laughing.

At least the pup had steered him right. The high-hatted witch mannequin out front drew his eye, and him, right to Darinda Lowell's door. Like the business card, Set A Spell's display window was decorated with a crescent moon and stars. He tried to peer within but saw only gloom. The sign on the door read *Open*. He smiled and went inside.

The moment he stepped through the doorway he sensed the presence of the enemy.

He let the door fall shut behind him. His nose searched the room. He took a breath and sneezed explosively.

The enemy responded with an ear-raking yowl. There on the sill crouched an orange tabby bristled up to about the size of a tiger. It flexed its claws and bared its teeth. He bared his own. The cat spat a hiss, and Roderick snarled. They glowered challenge at each other. Finally the cat vaulted off the sill and streaked for the back of the shop. Its malevolent eyes, yellow as Lucifer's, glared out at him from the shadows.

A London Werewolf in America

"Oh, hey. Hi there." A bony blonde girl with a mannish haircut came out and rounded the counter. She shot a glance over her shoulder at the cat, which swore vehemently. "Don't mind him. He scratch you?"

"I didn't get close enough. No offense to you or your pet, but I don't get on with cats."

"Yeah, I noticed." She pursed her lips, then grinned up at him. "British accent, ticked-off kitty—you're Darinda's werewolf, aren't you?"

He raised both brows. "I see my reputation precedes me. You are...?"

"Peri." She thrust her hand at him. Not without trepidation, he took it. Her nails were nearly as long as the cat's and painted periwinkle, with glitter. "I guess you're here to see Darinda. She'll be out in a minute. She's working some major magic." At the rear of the shop, a toilet flushed. So did the girl. "Tribute to the water gods," she said.

She held onto his hand as if she expected something miraculous to happen. Apparently it didn't, because she let go with a little shrug and a wisp of disappointment on her face. "I'll tell Darinda you're here. Make yourself at home." She skipped toward the rear of the shop. On the way she flipped a wall switch, and the lights sprang on. "Sorry for the gloomy. We're a magic shop. We've got a rep to uphold."

She giggled and left him. A final hiss clawed him from the shadows in back, then the scalding yellow eyes disappeared.

He prowled around the shop. He'd never seen such a collection of junk, not even in Grandmama's attic. Candles by the gross. Herbs both dried and potted. Books with titles like *Simple Enchantments* and *Necromancy for Dummies*. Stone gargoyles in various sizes. Stuffed bats and globe lights hanging from the ceiling. An entire wall devoted to wizarding robes, long glittery gowns, and skimpy studded leather pieces, along with makeup in garish colors, silver jewelry and accessories. That explained where the cubs on the street had gotten their ludicrous costumes.

In short, it carried the type of paraphernalia an ignorant monkey would imagine a witch would need. However, not all of it was trash. She had a healthy stock of basil on those shelves. Vampires liked to flavor their blood with basil when they couldn't get fresh. Not all the books were recentvintage paperbacks. Some of the more tattered volumes had titles in Latin and Greek. That gargoyle in the corner wasn't pockmarked cement. It was mummified. He suspected she kept an entirely different inventory in back, for after-hours customers.

Such shops existed in England and had for centuries. They popped into temporary existence down a side street, peddled their wares for a brief span, then moved on. They were usually run by Bulgarians and always smelled faintly of cheese.

Nothing cheesy about this place, beyond certain items of merchandise. It had its own unique scent to it. Magic, perhaps. Definitely hers. One deep breath and he could practically feel her hair between his fingers, taste her skin on his tongue. She had set her stamp on this venture, marked it with her personality. A smile of satisfaction bloomed on his lips. Territoriality was a trait a wolf could appreciate.

He paused to inspect a terrarium in a corner, angled to catch every last ray of sunlight. The tank held a foot-long lizard that looked like a mutant iguana. The ghastly thing flicked a purple tongue at him and hissed in mild annoyance.

"Don't mind Norman. He's basically harmless."

Aha, the witch. If she thought she could intimidate him out of her life at this point with only an arch glare, she was sadly mistaken. Here in her shop, away from that smoke she'd conjured at the airport, he could get a better handle on her scent. It held a tang no mere ape could lay claim to. Its spiciness made his mouth water.

"Mr. Chase," she started.

"Roderick." He bared his teeth in a charming smile. It tightened a bit at the corners. "That beastly cat isn't yours, is it?"

"Springsteen? No, he's Peri's. My familiar is Stormin' Norman there." She nodded at the tank.

He glanced within. The lizard blinked languidly back at him, upper and lower lids oozing together. "Not your average sort of familiar, is he?"

"Shows what you know. Norman's a dragon."

"Indeed." He took a closer look. The lizard remained unperturbed. "Bit small for a dragon," Roderick remarked.

"They only grow as big as their tank. If I kept him in the tub he'd be larger."

"No wings?"

A London Werewolf in America

"Not on that breed. Good thing, or he'd be buzzing all over the store. Other than the cost for fire insurance, he's pretty low-maintenance."

Of course she was joking. The thing was a prop for the monkeys. A monitor lizard with glued-on spines and eyebrows. It munched placidly on a leaf of Romaine. In a corner of the terrarium lay a glob of raw chicken, and what appeared to be charcoal briquettes.

Roderick turned his back to the tank. He wasn't here for lizards. "If you say so. At any rate, I've the afternoon free. I thought you might be interested in—"

"Let's cut to the chase, Chase." Tipped off by Peri, Darinda had time to plan her attack. She hadn't counted on those yellow eyes. They hit her like a sledgehammer and sent shockwaves down to her Nikes. Even in khakis and a pullover sweater there was no mistaking his breed, or his sheer masculinity, or his intentions. Wolves were short on subtlety and direct in what they wanted. And this one wanted—

She stiffened her shoulders. It didn't matter what he wanted. He wasn't going to get. She summoned her power, cloaked it about her, and had the satisfaction of watching that smug lupine grin of his falter. He recovered swiftly with no drop in the wanting. "Pigheaded" also fit the were description.

"I won't even ask how you found me," she went on. "We both know why you're really here. It isn't going to happen."

That infuriating smirk returned. "No?"

"No." She folded her arms across her chest. "I know a wolf on the prowl when he barges into my shop. Of any species."

"We can dispense with the awkward chitchat, then. I invite you to lunch, you say yes, we discover how attracted we are to each other, and afterwards—"

She held up her hand. The air in front of him suddenly took on gelid solidity. He tested it with the flat of his palm. It had a bit of give, but turned stiff at resistance. He could move in any direction except toward Darinda.

"This only delays the inevitable, you know," he informed her. "You want me. I can smell it on you."

"That's my bath oil. I don't waste time on married men, or soon-to-bemarried men. You want a last fling, look elsewhere."

His eyes thinned. "Word travels fast."

"I'm a witch. We have ways of finding things out. We also honor oaths, our own and others'. I won't help you betray your mate's trust with an hour of empty sex."

"It wouldn't be empty. Or only an hour."

"No means no, wolfie. So, if that's all you're here for..."

She extended her arm. The air-shield crowded against him, forcing him backward toward the door.

"Wait." Typical wolf, he didn't plan on going out without a fight. "That's not the only reason I'm here. I came for—" His desperate gaze scoured the shop's interior and hit on the sign by the register. "A reading. I came for a reading."

"Sure you did."

"Yes. I admit it, I'm here to be mated. I want to know how it turns out. Will we get on, how many pups will we have, will our pack prosper, that sort of thing."

He was lying, of course. You just couldn't trust a wolf in a pullover sweater, no matter how sexy he looked in it. Her resolve wavered, and so did her shield. Instantly Roderick dug in his heels and stood fast. Darinda sighed and dispersed her shield. "Okay, you get a reading. Then you leave."

"For now."

"For good."

Roderick shrugged. He took out his wallet and pulled out a wad of American currency, three times what the sign said she charged. "Enough?"

"Sufficient." Darinda went behind the counter before he could swoop down on her. He strolled over and laid the money on the counter. She didn't look at it, or touch it. Same for him, though she could feel the heat of his stare on her. She reached into the shoebox and scooped up the cards, shook them together and shuffled. "Try not to be upset if the news isn't good. I have no control over what the cards tell me."

He eyed the cards, suspicious. "Is that a poker deck?"

"Would you rather have Tarot? I can do either."

"No, this will do." He smiled widely and leaned his hip against the counter. "It's certainly different. What do I do?"

Darinda shuffled, cut the deck, and fanned it. "Pick a card." "Seriously?" "The card you select will represent you. The reading builds around it." Hecate's bra, she was sweating. She felt a sudden chilly sense of foreboding which card would end up in his hand.

He made an exaggerated show of plucking just the right card. He held it up before his eyes, its back to her, and peered at her over the top of it. "Do I put it back in the deck?"

"No, down on the counter, face up." She closed her eyes and listened to the whisper of pasteboard landing on wood. His breathing was another whisper, steady and expectant. Her own breath she held in her lungs.

She cracked her lids a smidge and peeked at the card.

King of Spades.

At her stifled moan Roderick leaned over the counter, dangerously close to her. He actually sounded worried. "Is it bad?"

"No. Of course it isn't. It's just your card." She shoved him back and briskly dealt the next card off the top. She caught the flash of red, but couldn't stop herself. The Queen of Hearts landed on the counter beside the King of Spades.

Oh crap.

"That means what?" Roderick prompted.

"Love," she said, her voice only a little strained. "Your mate-to-be." That must be it, of course. This was Roderick's reading, not her own. The Queen could represent anyone. "Let's see where it goes."

It went to three diamonds in a row. King and Queen linked together on life's journey. Then the trouble started, in the form of the two of clubs. The two of spades followed. "That's not good."

"Why not?"

"Clubs mean difficulty, and spades mean change. Sometimes drastic change. You and your mate are joined together, but it won't be happy. Not at first."

He sighed in resignation. "I didn't imagine it would be."

"Getting cold paws? Sounds like it's a little late for that. Is she—"

"I've no idea what she is. I've never met the girl."

Darinda froze in the act of dealing. "Excuse me?"

"I said, we've never met. We've spoken on the phone, and I've seen photos of her, but that's it. This is a political union, arranged by my pack leader. Neither of us had any say in the matter." "Uh-huh." Darinda tapped the back of the card with her fingernail. "No offense, but does your pack know what century we're living in?"

"No offense to you, but you've no idea of the complexity of wolf society. How regimented we are. The alpha barks, you jump, or else you're out of the pack. A lone wolf doesn't survive long." His expressive lips twisted. "You've no idea how much I envy you monkeys—excuse me, you humans, I mean. Land of the free. How I wish."

Aha. Darinda saw it all. Young, ambitious alpha male, chafing under the rule of a pack leader. That explained his atrocious behavior, although it didn't excuse it. "A word of advice? Picking up women right before you get married isn't going to help anything."

"Well, it's not as if I'll be able to afterwards, is it? Might as well have my fun while I can."

She bit down on her heated retort. Among the weres, marriage was sacrosanct. They mated for life and never strayed. She knew that much about them. "Let's finish up the reading," she said briskly. "Who knows, maybe it'll get better."

It didn't. It got worse. The Jack of Clubs came up next, an indication of serious trouble ahead.

"Better yet?" Roderick said.

Rather than respond, she laid down the next card. Her heart stopped.

Ace of Spades.

"Your scent's gone sour," Roderick informed her. "I know that isn't good."

She raised her cobalt eyes to meet his. "Your life is in danger."

Hecate's tits. First love, then mortal peril. The whole clichéd kettle of fish. He looked as if he might have laughed it off, but his nose kept twitching. "From what source?"

"Let's see if it will tell us." She dealt the next three cards. Diamond, spade, diamond. "The link," she said, pointing out the diamonds. "Looks like it's personal. Someone close to you wants you dead. That fiancée you've never met?"

"Or my entire immediate family. So tell me." He gestured at the cards, not quite as carelessly as she was sure he'd intended. "Do they succeed?"

Doggedly she laid out the rest of the reading. Black predominated. All at once the Ace of Hearts broke through, one last surge of love against the

dark. The final card was the noncommittal five of diamonds. She could read no resolution from it.

Roderick had been leaning ever closer over the counter. He was practically in her lap. "Well? What happens? Do I survive the wedding?"

"I can't tell. Everything's up in the air. The future's never set in stone." Abruptly she swept the whole deal off the counter and into the box underneath. She shoved Roderick's payment back at him. "It doesn't mean a thing. They're only cards."

"And all that sweat on your forehead and fear stink in your odor doesn't mean anything either."

He was so close she could smell him. He smelled like fresh-mown grass, as if he'd rolled in it. She wanted to back off but couldn't move. When she dared to look up, she found his lips only inches from hers. "Do yourself a favor," she said. "Be careful."

"Always," he murmured, and leaned in.

The door crashed open, and an elderly woman charged in, loaded for bear. "There you are!" Her white-hot glare hit Roderick square between the yellow eyes. The woman's eyes were also yellow, Darinda saw. Maybe not loaded for bear. Maybe loaded for wandering wolf. "The nerve of you! Running out on Nora Duquesne like that. Do you know the time I had, tracking you? If you hadn't mentioned South Street last night—" She spotted Darinda, and her snarl switched targets. "Oh, *I* see. That's it, puppy. It's the leash for you. I ought to shut you up in a kennel until the wedding's done."

"It's nothing like that." Roderick hopped off the counter and put equal distance between himself and the women. That didn't stop the older one from striding up to him and landing a cuff on his neck. "Ow! Will you stop?"

"He came here for a reading," Darinda said and indicated the sign. "I invited him. We met briefly at the airport, and I told him I'm a seer. He told me all about his upcoming wedding. He wanted to know if everything works out."

"Oh?" The woman thinned her eyes at the both of them in a pull-theother-one look. "And?"

"I fall madly in love with my bride and we live happily ever after," Roderick said with a flick of a glance at Darinda. "Or so I was told." "And that's it," Darinda finished. "Nothing else happened. Or is going to." She ignored Roderick's muffled snort and the silent mockery of the cards under the counter. She needed to diffuse the negative vibes. "Wait. Just a moment." She darted over to a shelf and took down a large plain tin, which she presented to the growling woman.

The woman sniffed it suspiciously. "What's this?"

"Scalp powder," Darinda said. "It's okay. I'm a witch. I know what you are, and I know what city air can do to your coats." She spared a smile for Roderick. "Consider it a wedding present."

"You think you know quite a bit," the woman started, then something about the tin's odor caught her attention. She sniffed it more carefully. Her head shot up and her stare pierced Darinda. "Do you know Charles Meadows? Philadelphia Police Department?

"Officer Charlie? Sure, he's a regular. We get a lot of referrals from him."

The woman smiled, all snarls vanished. "Of course. You're *that* witch on South Street. Charles is my son. I'm Letitia Meadows." She offered her cuffing hand, and the women shook. "Charles swears by you. I must say, your flea-and-tick concoction literally saved our hides last summer. I trust you also know Alexander?"

"I've done work for him. I try to stay on his good side."

"Don't we all." They rolled their eyes in unison, and a friendship was born on the spot. "You call me Letty, dear. And you're—oh, Charles has said your name a million times."

"Darinda Lowell." She plucked a business card off the counter and handed it to Letty. Once she replayed the airport encounter in her head, it was easy to guess how Roderick had tracked her down. And speaking of whom— she glanced around, just in time to catch the silent closing of the door. "Don't look now, but Roderick's skipped out on you again."

"He won't get far. This old sniffer's still got it." She tapped her nose. "That pup. Always was a handful. I'll see he doesn't bother you again."

Letty bustled out, clutching her tin like it held gold. Roderick hadn't gone far. Darinda glimpsed him on the sidewalk, just at the edge of the window. "You're in for it now," she murmured as Letty closed in on him. But the confrontation moved beyond her eye- and earshot, and no way was she going to peek out the door, as much as her curiosity egged her on.

Arranged marriages, in this day and age. Darinda breathed a prayer of thanks to Hecate that she'd been born witch and not were. "Good luck, wolfie. You're going to need it."

Assuming he survived.

That wasn't her business either, and she wouldn't allow herself to get involved. The Queen represented his mate, not her. The packs would sort it out. He seemed intelligent, his behavior toward women aside, and clearly had experience watching his back. He'd be fine. Although, tonight she'd light a candle anyway.

Peri poked her head out of the back. "Is he gone? Can I let go of Springsteen now?"

"Yes. Thanks for abandoning me."

"I was right here the whole time. You did fine, what I could hear over the hissing." Peri trotted into the shop, followed by a bristling Springsteen. The cat stalked over every inch of the storefront and sprayed where Roderick had stood. "Hey!" Peri yelped and scooped up her familiar. "Bad kitty! I should put you in the tank with Norman. I'll clean that up."

"You better. What happened? I thought you wanted him."

"So did I, but..." Peri shrugged. "He isn't meant for me. I knew it the second I shook his hand. Too bad, you're right, he is a hunk. Lucky her, whoever his fiancée is. Could've been lucky you. I thought he was gonna leap right over the counter."

So had Darinda. She managed not to shiver. "You know werewolves. See, want, take. Not exactly masters of subtlety."

"Well, that reading you gave him probably scared him off. Life in danger? That was classic." Peri deposited Springsteen on the windowsill. "It was an act, right?"

"Most of it." She didn't want to think about the reading, or Roderick Chase, or what his proximity did to her. Fortunately she didn't have to. A quartet of customers came through the door with out-of-town written all over them. Darinda put on her welcoming smile and got back down to business.

Chapter 4

The club wasn't bad, for a fang bar. Noisy, of course, but not excessively so. Not as many monkeys as he'd feared. Costumes were a bit more restrained than on South Street. The interior reeked of basil, simian sweat, desperation and overexcitement. Just the sort of place gormy Eugene would pick to hold a family get-together.

"Place is slow tonight," Eugene remarked in an irritated tone, as if this were a bad thing. They had a table just off the main aisle, just small enough for Roderick to feel cramped. His cousins ringed him—hyperactive Eugene, cool Lucy, quiet little teenaged Emma. Charlie was on duty and wouldn't be joining them. Lorraine, next eldest after Charlie, had married since Roderick had seen her last, and now lived with her mate's pack in New Jersey. He wondered if Eugene had dared bring her here for her last night as a lone wolf.

"Hang in there, Rod." Eugene clapped him on the back. "After midnight we'll head home and have a run. We might even scare up some game, but don't hold me to that. The park's overrun by coyotes these days, and you know how *they* are."

He didn't, having never met a coyote, but the thought of a good, long run in wolf form made his limbs ache with yearning. He sipped his drink, a frothy concoction heavy on the goat's blood, and politely shook his head at the ape girl trying to entice him to dance. Eugene claimed her instead. Roderick watched them move onto the dance floor and engage in jerky movements that resembled a three-legged dog attempting a hump. He didn't watch for long.

He tried to make small talk with Lucy and Emma. His cousins remained polite but reserved, intimidated by his alpha presence. When a couple of were boys came to their table and nervously asked them, through him, for a dance, Roderick wasn't sure who was more relieved. He nodded permission, and the girls gratefully made their escape.

For a time he watched the staff at work. Two wolves and a Japanese fox tended bar. They doled out straight liquor to the apes but kept a separate list of blood-based, nonalcoholic drinks for their real clientele, the steady stream of vampires who drifted in and out. Their noses told them who was who, monkey, were or bat. An efficient system.

Lycaon bite it, what was wrong with him? The apes with Eugene was comely enough. Two days ago he'd have moved on her without a second thought. He wasn't one to think too deeply with a she involved.

That was then. Now had become downright uncomfortable.

He growled and downed a stiff gulp of his drink. Face facts: He'd quite lost his taste for casual romps since he got Darinda's scent in his nose. The witch must have put a spell on him. This restlessness, these thoughts, were all her fault.

He glanced around the dank interior. Eugene and the monkey had finished their dance, or whatever you wanted to call it. The girl had disappeared. Eugene was attempting, with little success, to chat up a disinterested bat. Lucy and Emma giggled at the bar while their conquests bought them drinks. No age restrictions on service, as weres could not stomach alcohol.

The wolf lads appeared harmless enough, and Lucy would look after her sister. Bugger Eugene. No one would miss him, Roderick decided, if he stepped outside for a bit.

Free of the fang bar, he stood on the pavement and sucked in the brisk night air. It made a sorry statement indeed that a city's grimy air outranked the club's. At least the street had decent circulation. He took in a long breath, slowly, through his nose, and let it sigh out again with only a little cough.

Tomorrow night he would meet his intended. After that, his days of freedom would be numbered. Mother wanted this transaction wrapped up quickly. Tighten up the choke collar, cut off his air completely.

He supposed he could always slip the collar, abandon the family, run lone. And die or go mad, cut off from pack support. He could have challenged Bernadette, but what good would that do? Even if he won he'd still have to marry, because the family would never accept an alpha of his age without a she and the promise of pups. Check and literal mate.

You had to hand it to the Queen Mum, she always covered all the angles. No doubt the reason she'd remained alpha so long.

That skipped his thoughts back to Darinda. She'd faced him down when he'd cornered her in her den. Confident, eye straight to eye, not an inch of give. Now *that* was an alpha. Think of how magnificent she would be in bed. He sighed. If only she'd been were.

Lost in hopeless fantasies, at first he didn't notice the scruffy pair in battered denim creeping up on him. Their primate stench alerted him. He whirled on them abruptly, and they froze. They were done up in vampire leathers, their faces painted like Kabuki actors. Headed for the club, no doubt. He stepped away from the entrance, but they kept coming toward him. Why, he couldn't fathom. "Can I help you with something?" he asked.

The male opened his mouth, then hesitated. Sweat poured off him like a cataract. The sullen female shouldered him aside. Her dirty blonde hair was streaked with purple. She stood with her hands thrust into her coat's baggy pockets and her eyes thinned to slits. "You Roderick Chase?" she demanded.

He raised a brow. "Yes. How did you—"

"Told you," she said to her partner. She yanked a knife from her pocket and lunged at him.

Sheer dumbfoundment rooted him in place. She thrust her blade directly into his unprotected chest, right for his heart.

Except the knife seemed to hit something that wasn't him. It skidded right over his sweater without even leaving a crease.

The girl's eyes widened, but she didn't lose her pluck. She took a blunt jab at his neck. Given her proximity she couldn't possibly miss, yet somehow she did. The blade whispered right around his neck without even touching the skin.

This time the both of them gaped at the knife. "What the hell?" the girl blurted.

"What'd I tell you? He's a werewolf. You gotta use silver." The male charged in to try his luck. His knife belonged to the butcher family, with a tarnished patina on the blade. In addition he wielded a length of chain, not silver but nonetheless deadly.

A London Werewolf in America

No need for resistance with the likes of this. Roderick simply sidestepped and stuck out his foot. The male belly-flopped on the pavement with a painful-sounding thud. Both knife and chain went skidding into the gutter.

That left him only the stupefied female to deal with. Roderick seized her wrist and twisted. Her knife clattered on the cement. He opened his mouth to question her. She stared up at him, and screamed.

Oh bugger. Of course it was the teeth, long and getting longer by the second.

The change was a common enough response to mortal danger, automatic, instinctive. Just not what he wanted right now. Not only couldn't he interrogate his attackers without a human voice, he'd had no time to shed his clothes. To the girl's shrieks were added the immensely painful ripping noises of a perfectly good pair of trousers shredding off his werewolf body. He also lost his grip on the girl, as paws aren't made for grasping. She backed off frantically as he pitched forward to land on all fours.

Phhhhtttt. There went the seams on his pullover. By Lycaon, these murderous monkeys were going to pay for this.

He shook off the rags that had been his outfit and bared his fangs at the girl. *Yes, you'd better scream, you sodding ape*. Damn his tail, where was Eugene? At this point the primate was terrified enough to babble all the answers he wanted. Once she realized he couldn't do worse than snarl at her, they could bid cooperation good-bye.

Something whistled over his head. He'd all but forgotten the male. The monkey had abandoned his knife in favor of the chain. A landed blow would be damaging, but none of the blows landed. Granted they were monkeys, but could even apes be so incompetent?

Enough of this. He needed only one to question. He eyed the male's crotch and licked his muzzle. The baboon took the hint. "No amount of money's worth this," he said, dropped the chain, and fled.

That left the girl, crab-scrabbling away from him and screaming her painted face off. Their performance had drawn quite an audience, with their pointed fingers and cell phone cameras. Not what he, both a were and a foreigner, needed. He caught the girl's shirt in his jaws and dragged her toward the fang bar. He suspected it wouldn't be the first time some wolf or bat had hauled a struggling victim inside. It seemed a workable plan, shattered like the bullet that struck the doorjamb just above his head.

Roderick dropped the girl and stared about. Another bullet pinged off the sidewalk just short of his right forepaw. The gathering crowd added their screams to the girl's.

There. The beat-up Chevrolet across the street. The one with the rifle barrel poking out the window. He scented gunpowder and exhaust but couldn't get a fix on the gunman. It might be a monkey; it might be a bat. It might be one of his own.

A third shot parted the fur on his shoulders. The man in the car cursed viciously. Like the chain and the knives, the bullets couldn't seem to hit their target.

No sense in pushing his luck. Roderick whirled and bolted.

Shots followed him up the block. He plunged across the street. Brakes squealed and drivers cursed. Pedestrians scattered. Sirens wailed in his direction, and he flattened his ears against their shrillness.

He ran flat out for several blocks until noise and panic faded with distance. Eventually he slowed to a trot, then a complete stop. He stood panting, ears back and tail at an uncertain angle, and took stock.

He had no idea where he was.

All right, think it through. The fang bar was on Arch Street, near Chinatown. Eugene had said so. Which meant next to nothing to Roderick. He could back trail himself to the fang bar, although, judging by the scream of converging sirens, that probably wasn't the best of options at the moment. He had no clue how to return to Fairmount Park, and couldn't ask directions in this form. His other form now had no clothing. He imagined the prudish monkey authorities would take a dim view of that.

They'd known his name. They'd known he was were. They'd confirmed his identity before they attacked him, and they'd come at him to kill.

His first day in the City of Brotherly Love. Growling under his breath, Roderick began walking.

Luckily this part of this blighted city was nearly free of pedestrians. The few apes he encountered and sidled around paid him little attention beyond snapped fingers and "Here, doggie, doggie." Nobody seemed upset by the sirens, or the sight of a wolf on the street. Life in the big city, as Eugene no doubt would put it. Then, like a ray of sunlight bursting through fog, he caught a whiff of grass and trees. Eagerly he loped in that direction.

He spotted the outline of Independence Hall and breathed a whine of relief. The only spot in this ape-infested jungle he was familiar with. He couldn't find his way back to Aunt Letty's from here, but he could make it to South Street. He oriented himself on 5^{th} and broke into a trot.

* * * *

After dark, Set A Spell's mortal trade slowed to a trickle, and Darinda's real customers came in. After five years of serving an otherworldly clientele she thought she'd seen it all, but a vampire with a broken fang was new. "This happened how?" she asked him.

"Pnchth innuh muph," the vamp said around his hand and her fingers. She dabbed a bit of gel on the stump. "Ouph! Wch whuttuh doinph!"

"He got punched in the mouth," the vampire's androgynous human companion translated. "The vic had a set of brass knuckles. He looked like an accountant. Who knew?"

Darinda tsked while she smeared gel. "This will regenerate, you know. When you wake up tomorrow night it'll be good as new."

"Hrts now," the vamp complained.

She took her hand away. "Still?"

The vampire considered. "Um, no. Not any more. Thanks."

"Good. Like I said, it'll regenerate by tomorrow. And don't lick it." The vamp guiltily tucked his tongue back into his mouth. Darinda shook a handful of white pills into a packet. "Calcium," she said. "Toughen up the dentin."

The vampire took the packet. "You wouldn't happen to carry blood, would you? I missed dinner."

"I don't do the Dark Arts. Try Schuman's."

"Hope he has straws." The vamp counted out a trio of bills. "Brass knucks inna face. From a *vic*. What's the world coming to?"

"Yeah, tough town," his companion agreed. "I say we go back to Ohio. Hey, you got a werewolf out here."

Darinda came to attention. "What's he doing?"

"He's scratching on the door. Now he's trying to work the knob with his teeth. Should I let him in?"

He's got his nerve, Darinda thought with a huff. Of course it would be Chase. Couldn't he take a hint? Or a flat-out refusal? She stalked across the shop and opened the door herself. The wolf ducked inside.

The sight of him squelched her indignation under a burst of awe as well as a thrill of fear. Her vision at the airport hadn't done him justice. In wolf form he was enormous, with rich black fur and a huge brush of a tail. His form resembled an Alaskan Malamute more than the slender American wolves she was used to: broad chest and forehead, compact muscular body, blunt muzzle, small round ears. It was the ferocity in his yellow eyes that almost made her recoil. This was no simple wolf, said those eyes. This was a lord of the forest, used to power and command. This was the monster that once kept frightened peasants cowering in their huts, that Irish wolfhounds had been bred to kill.

Roderick stopped before her, reared up on his hind legs and shifted. Little changed from shape to shape. He still radiated dangerous power. He was still covered in black hair. And he was still enormous.

The vamp's companion gasped. "Oh! Hello, sailor!"

While Roderick withered the vampire's boyfriend with a glower, Darinda was able to compose herself. *C'mon*, she mentally chided herself, *it's just a naked man. You've seen those before.*

Not so often, though, her inner self admitted. And this one was a naked werewolf, which made him a whole other animal.

Not interested, Darinda thought firmly. Her inner voice scoffed. She slammed the gate shut on it and met Roderick's eyes. Maintaining her eye line proved harder than anticipated. "What are you doing here?"

His pale face and quivering nose belied the force of his voice. "Somebody just tried to kill me."

"Oooh, poor baby. Who'd do such a thing?" the vampire's boyfriend gushed. "You stick with us, honey. We'll—"

"Let's go," the vamp snarled. He grabbed his companion's arm and propelled him out the door.

This left Darinda alone with a panting, highly agitated and thoroughly naked werewolf. "Uh...you're sure..."

"Yes, I'm sodding sure. Somebody shoots a rifle at you, it's hard to mistake their intentions."

Good point. Crap, still hard to concentrate. She darted to the clothing rack and grabbed a wizard's robe. "Here. Put this on."

"I'm not—oh, of course." He shrugged into the robe. "One forgets propriety when one's nearly murdered. Hmm. Roomy."

"Most of the wizards I get are full-figured. Are you hurt?"

"No, they missed. Repeatedly. Which is odd." He stopped. His expression darkened. "Where's the cat?"

"He went home with Peri. Come here. Sit down." She steered him around the counter and onto the folding chair behind the register. The shock of his outrage and adrenaline hit her even through the thick wool robe. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

Unfortunately, nightsiders getting shot at wasn't new to her. She kept emergency supplies to deal with a number of species. Within minutes she returned with a mug of steaming beef broth, a were's equivalent of a hot cup of coffee. He all but snatched it out of her hands. His own were trembling from delayed reaction. He angled his body so she wouldn't see, and she pretended not to. He downed half the mug at a gulp. "Thank you," he said roughly.

Quietly, Darinda went to the door and turned the hanging sign from *Open* to *Closed*. She returned to the counter and leaned against it. "Tell me what happened."

"I already have. Somebody tried to kill me. Knives as well as guns." He peered up at her sharply. "This isn't some pretense to get at you."

"No, I believe you. You're clearly in shock. What was it? A drive-by? Robbery?"

"They established my identity before they attacked. Called me by name. They knew I'm were. Is that how muggers operate in your country?"

"Noooo, not usually. So this was a hit. Was it other weres? Vampires?"

"Humans. At least the ones with the knives. I can only assume with the gunman. I couldn't catch his scent." He polished off the broth. "Life in danger. You called that one right enough."

Darinda indicated the wall phone behind him. "You want to call Charlie, or should I?"

He barely glanced at the phone. His mouth was tight, his eyes cold as a winter moon. "Nobody outside the family knows I'm here in America."

"Big Alex knows," she reminded him. "He could have ordered this as a warning."

"He wouldn't know I'd be at that club tonight, unless one of my cousins tipped him off. Is he in the habit of employing apes to do his dirty work?"

She had to shake her head. Hiring non-weres for a hit wasn't Big Alex's style. Roderick set his empty mug aside. "So it's family. You were right. Someone in the family wants me gone."

"Or your fiancée's family," Darinda pointed out. "Maybe she didn't agree to the marriage. Maybe she has a human boyfriend with serious objections." When Roderick still didn't reach for the phone she headed for it herself. "I'm calling Charlie."

His hand shot out and caught her wrist, stopping her. "We can't trust him."

Her heart stuttered at his touch. She forced herself to ignore it, and overlook his automatic "we." "He's a cop."

"Yes. Trained to use firearms. That aside, he's a wolf first. You've no idea of the politics. Rank-shifting's as natural to us as changing shape. It goes on constantly. Even for someone like Charlie. If he saw an advantage in killing me, he'd take it. So would any of them. That must explain why they waited until now," he went on, more to himself. "Isolate me in a foreign land, then go for the throat. You're right, it probably isn't Charlie. It's more likely Mother or Tamra."

Carefully Darinda pried his hand off her wrist. "Who'd benefit from your death?"

He shrugged. "All of them. My sister and mother would be free of a rival. The lower ranks could advance. You need suspects? Let me list my relatives. We haven't even gotten to my betrothed's family or your Big Alex."

"That doesn't leave you too many options."

He slanted a calculating look up at her. "There's you."

"No, there isn't. I'm—"

A squeal of tires interrupted her. Both she and Roderick looked up. A police cruiser had pulled up to the curb just outside the shop. The chair scraped back as Roderick stood. "Cousin Charlie."

"Saves us a call." Darinda trotted to the door and opened it just as Charlie's hand hit the knob. "Hi, Charlie. I'll bet you're looking for him."

"Rod! Lycaon, this is a stroke of luck." Charlie Meadows was a tall, trim wolf with chestnut hair and a thick moustache. "Eugene called me, told me what went down at the club. Why the hell didn't you call somebody? Mom's going scatty."

Roderick opened the wizard's robe. "I seem to have misplaced my cell."

"Uh huh. Darinda. Thanks for watching him. Mom told me you two met. I was hoping maybe you could track him, but I see you're way ahead. Now." He advanced on Roderick, all cop. "You want to fill me in? I couldn't get scat out of Eugene."

Once again composed, Roderick recited chapter and verse of his recent adventures. Darinda learned some additional facts, and noted the ones he left out, such as his attackers' awareness of his name and species. "Fortunately," he finished up, "I was able to find my way here. I was just about to call Aunt Letty. Sorry for the delay."

"Any idea who they were or why they went for you?"

Roderick shrugged. "They were monkeys. Who knows why monkeys do anything?"

"Probably a robbery. Kids after dope money. Speaking of which..." Charlie pulled a leather wallet from his pocket and tossed it to Roderick. "We recovered it from in front of the bar. You'll have to tell me if anything's missing. Looks like the money's intact."

He riffled through the wallet. "Were my assailants still there when you arrived?"

"Are they ever? Of course not. Probably took off when you turned into a wolf right in front of them. I realize you were under duress, but— Lycaon's guts, Rod, this isn't Chase Manor. We don't do that in public here. The humans are already leery of us. We don't need any more bad press."

"I'll try to remember that next time I'm shot at."

"Yeah." Charlie sighed. "Sorry." He glanced to Darinda. "He'll never tell me, so I'll ask you. Was he hurt?"

"Not that I could see." And she'd seen everything. The memory made her quiver inside. Mind out of the gutter, she ordered herself.

"Yes, that's the strange bit," Roderick said. "I can understand how the shooter would miss. Cars whizzing back and forth in the street and all that.

But the girl had me dead. Twice. And she missed, both times. Same for the other's chain. Nothing could touch me."

"The weapons bounced off?" Darinda said. "Like they'd hit a force field or something?"

"More like slid around. It was awfully odd."

Darinda nodded. "I think I know what happened. When you approached me at the airport, did you notice anything unusual? Any strange sensations or visions?"

"Well, when I first saw you, my heart sped up." He smiled disarmingly. She didn't smile back. He let the smile and the charm both drop. "Now that you mention it, I recall the color violet, of all things. And feeling full, like after a big meal. Feeling..."

Great-aunt Sophia. That was it. His mind leapt to a pack gathering in the deep forest, back when he'd been a small cub. He'd been drowsing in Greataunt Sophia's lap, full-fed and secure. Great-aunt Sophia wore her favorite violet dress. "Safe," he concluded. "I felt safe."

"That must be it, then," Darinda said to Charlie. "My brother was flying back to Chicago. I put a protection spell on his plane. Roderick came up to me while I was at it. He must have gotten caught in its sphere."

"And it's still operating?" Charlie said doubtfully. "After over a day?"

"It was a big plane. I cast a potent spell. It should fade by morning. Protection spells are always temporary. I can give you a charm to improve your luck, but that's the best I can do."

"Why?" Charlie pounced. "You think these people will try again?"

Should she mention the reading? She glanced at Roderick. His expression begged her to keep quiet. "Maybe not them specifically," she said carefully. "Let me get you an amulet. Couldn't hurt."

"Yeah, okay." She could tell Charlie had his suspicions, both as a wolf and a cop. But without cooperation, he had to let it drop. "Lycaon bite it, this better not be targeting. Rod, don't walk the streets alone for a while. There are places in the city even we stay out of, and you don't know them yet. And no more shifting in public. The were community tries to keep a low profile. Big Alex's orders."

"I won't shift if they don't shoot."

"Oh, for—"

Charlie broke off at Darinda's approach. She held a small pendant, a simple red stone on a thin bronze chain. She handed this to Roderick. "For luck. It won't deflect a knife, but it might increase your chances."

He bounced the pendant in his palm. It held a faint warmth, perhaps from her hand. Her scent washed over him. He shot a grin at her. "So I'm going to get lucky?"

With an almost lupine growl she shoved Roderick toward Charlie. "Take him home before *I* shoot him."

"The station first," Charlie said, taking Roderick's arm. "I want a full, official account of what happened tonight. Humans, vampires, I don't care. Nobody jumps family and walks away clean. Thanks, Darinda. For everything. You ever need help, just howl and we'll hear you. I'll send the robe back in the morning." He checked the street before he herded Roderick outside. The two climbed into his car.

Darinda watched them pull away. Roderick's smoldering stare was locked on the window, and on her. She stepped back. She'd done all she could to protect him, all any witch could do. It was up to him and his pack now. The same pack that might have just tried to kill him. "Not my problem," she muttered to herself.

If only she could get the memory of those piercing yellow eyes out of her head.

"Not my problem," she repeated. It sounded even shakier this time. Irritated at herself, she picked up Norman and cradled him, basking in his warmth. "Wolves," she crooned to him. "Let them chase their own tails, huh, baby?"

Norman sighed. So did Darinda. Tonight wouldn't end fast enough.

* * * *

Darinda was with a customer, and so couldn't dash to the wall phone when it rang at midmorning. She kept up her spiel on which herbs could do what and tried to look more chipper and wide-awake than she felt. She'd closed the shop at two a.m. and gone home to a fitful sleep, full of dreams about wolves getting shot by gorillas. She thought about calling Charlie for an update but didn't want Roderick to hear about it. He didn't need any encouragement. Peri snagged the phone. "Hey there! You've reached Set A Spell, purveyors of all things witchy. I'm Peri. What can I do for you? Who?" She glanced over her shoulder at Darinda and smirked. "Dahrinder'? She's with somebody. You want to hang on, or leave a message?"

He must have picked message, because Peri stayed on the phone but turned her back for privacy. Darinda masked both a curse and a yawn and focused on her sales pitch.

Ten minutes later, with a satisfied, herb-laden customer safely out the door, Darinda steadied her voice and asked, "Who was that on the phone?"

"Like you don't know," Peri said with a maddening grin. "That was your werewolf buddy. I said you'd call him back."

"I don't want to call him back."

"I think you should. I don't think he wants a date. He sounded all serious-like."

Darinda came fully awake at once. He'd found something out. "Did he leave a number?"

"On the pad."

She didn't dial right off. *Don't look too eager*. Oh, Goddess. What was she, in high school? She stabbed in the number. The strain in Aunt Letty's answering voice wiped all the vexation out of her. "Darinda? Oh, thank you for calling. It's been so horrible. Poor Roddy's just beside himself."

"Is that her?" Roderick came on the line. "Darinda. Thank you for returning my call. I'll be blunt. I want to hire you."

"For what? I told you last night, there's nothing more I can do. Protection spells work, but only short-term. I know you think it's a risk, but really, you should confide in Charlie and let him—"

"Not as a witch, per se. I want to hire you as my bodyguard."

Chapter 5

Meadowlands was a square two-story Federal villa with generous lawns, hedges and a well-tended garden, set back within the sheltering trees, across the street from East Park Reservoir. The structure dated back to the early 19th century, when Fairmount Park had been considered "the country" by Philadelphia's elite. Naturally, Darinda figured as she maneuvered her Toyota up the drive, the city's packs would establish themselves in a place of trees and grass and game.

Most of the Park's mansions belonged to the city and had long been open to the public, but a couple, like Meadowlands, remained in private hands. She suspected Big Alex had a paw in that. She wondered if the folks who managed Strawberry Mansion and Lemon Hill knew who their neighbors were.

She wondered also, not for the first time, what exactly she was doing here.

"I can't," had been her initial response to Roderick's proposal. "I'm not a bodyguard. I'm a witch."

"Yes, I'm fully aware of that. That's why I want you to protect me. If brute force were all that were needed I could handle this myself. But they're coming at me with armed humans, and simply killing my attackers isn't an acceptable recourse. Your spells deflect their weapons, as ably demonstrated last night. I can use such an advantage. Between your magic and my lupine abilities, we can put a swift end to this."

"No, 'we' aren't doing anything. This is too far outside my skill zone. Can't you find someone else?"

"I've only just arrived in America. It's not as if I have a wide range of options."

"You have Charlie."

"I can't trust Charlie, or any wolf. I thought I explained that last night."

"Look. I know people who know people. I can get you somebody else."

"I don't want 'somebody.' I want you."

She set her lips. "Uh-huh. That better not be what this is really about. Some twisted trick of yours to get me up to your lair."

"Lair? Do people even use that word anymore?" He huffed over the phone. "You won't be alone with me. Aunt Letty is here, and she doesn't tolerate nonsense, especially not from me. I doubt I'll be feeling too amorous anyway, what with my life in danger. I promise I will make no moves on you until after this is resolved."

"You'd better not."

"Then you'll do it?"

Darinda cursed herself for tumbling into his trap. She made one lastditch effort to extricate herself. "I'm a witch. Do you understand what that means? I've made a vow not to cause deliberate harm to any living being. If someone attacks you—"

"You can't stop them without hurting them? Perhaps you're not as good a witch as I thought."

"Perhaps I should just hang up and let your enemies get you."

"But you won't," he said. "Will you?"

No. She couldn't, dammit. She'd brought all this on with her reading. She'd known his life was in danger and she'd kicked him out of her store and her life with no more than a half-assed warning. If he'd died last night, the blot on her karma record would have tainted her for years.

She rubbed her tired, burning eyes. "I can't make any promises."

"I'll take what I can get. Bring enough clothes for a couple of days and whatever magic things you need. We'll look for you this afternoon. And thank you."

So here she was, working for a werewolf. No one ever said witches were overloaded with sense, she thought with a mental sigh.

The three-car garage behind the house had been left open, but Darinda parked in front of it instead of pulling in. She didn't want to look as if she'd come to stay. Three days, tops. Three was a good solid number. Long enough to root out Roderick's hidden enemy, settle the matter, and get back to her comfortable routine. After that, she privately vowed, she would steer clear of werewolves for life. Roderick himself came out to greet her. He opened the driver's side door for her. "Thank you for coming so promptly. Where are your bags?"

"That's it." She indicated the shapeless mass of her shoulder bag overflowing the seat beside her. "And a small suitcase in the back. Don't bother, I've got it."

He bothered anyway, lifting the suitcase off the back seat. He resisted her efforts to reclaim it. "This is all? I expected more."

"I'm only here temporarily. I wouldn't be here at all, but your aunt sounded almost hysterical. I came for her sake, not yours." She slammed the car door. To her disappointment, Roderick refused to wince. "Did you tell her the truth?"

"A version of it. I couldn't very well come right out and accuse her own litter of trying to kill me. I managed to steer the blame onto the Duquesnes, with a little left over for Big Alex. I had the devil's own time convincing her not to ring him up."

"Good call." This low-voiced exchange took place on the walk from the garage to the house. At the door Darinda stopped and planted herself before Roderick. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm here to protect you. Nothing else. *Absolutely* nothing else."

He shrugged, expressionless. Damn wolf. She turned to enter just as Aunt Letty came out. The older woman caught her up in a hug that almost bowled her over. She let go quickly, a good thing for Darinda's ribs. "Thank Lycaon you're here. It's so good of you to come help us."

"We never turn down anyone in serious need. Part of the witch's oath. Builds up the karma points." She focused on Letty and tried to ignore Roderick looming so closely at her back. He didn't touch her physically, but his presence crowded hers. Like letting a dog onto your bed, she thought. First thing you know, it's sprawled all over the blankets and you're on the floor.

Coolly, still not touching her, Roderick nudged the door fully open and ushered the women inside. He didn't need to touch her; his alpha energy claimed her, Aunt Letty, the house, the whole property. She forced herself to stop thinking about beds with big dogs in them.

"I wish Charles could be here," Aunt Letty fretted. "Eugene at least."

"You don't want Eugene to leave Lucy and Emma alone. And Charlie has more than me to look out for." Roderick shut the door. At the same time he deftly relieved Darinda of her shoulder bag before she could stop him. He smiled down at her. "Looks like it's just us."

At least they had a sharp-eyed chaperone. Darinda followed Letty inside.

She stepped into a cozy parlor furnished in antique hardwoods and a few modern overstuffed pieces. The well-used hearth still held the remains of a recent fire. A table leg looked as if it had been chewed on at some point in the distant past, and the sofa held traces of dog hair. Darinda doubted if dogs were responsible for either. Every window looked out on trees. An open staircase led to the second floor.

Aunt Letty headed for what Darinda guessed was the kitchen. "Roddy will show you to your room. Can I get you anything? Tea? Broth? Maybe a bit of lunch."

"Just the tea's fine, thanks."

Letty about-faced abruptly and returned to hug her again. This time Darinda felt her trembling. Any doubts Darinda had about coming here vanished at once. "I'm so happy it's you, dear," the she-wolf murmured. "Looking after Roddy. Not some stranger. You're known to the families, and your reputation is impeccable."

"Thanks. How about if I settle in, and then we can discuss the particulars."

Roderick had already started up the stairs, which left Darinda with no choice but to follow if she wanted her bags back. She made sure to walk and not trot. He wasn't *her* pack leader. Nonetheless, she moved briskly.

He waited for her outside a room just off the main hall. He stepped aside so she could enter. Like the parlor downstairs, the bedroom was roomy and tastefully furnished, with windows overlooking all manner of green. It also gave off a lived-in vibe a guest room shouldn't have. "Whose room is this?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yours, for the time being. I'm next door." He offered up a maddening smile. "This used to be Eugene's. I'm in Charlie's. There's no connecting door."

"I wasn't looking for one," she snapped, wrenching her stare off the dividing wall. "I just want to make sure I'm not putting anyone out."

"Not at the moment. The pups drop in frequently, so I'm told, but none of them live here. Charlie wants to be near the action, and the girls are staying in the city with Eugene while Emma goes to school. We're quite alone. Except for Aunt Letty, of course." He brushed past her and deposited her bags on the bed. "Fewer suspects to guard my back against. Unless you think Aunt Letty's the killer?"

"No, she's in the clear. I felt that when she touched me. She's honestly worried about you."

"Yes, I can smell her anxiety. You can tell the same from a touch?"

"And a lot more. More than I want, most of the time. Truth through contact is one of my talents." Not that she needed it with Roderick. It didn't take a witch to figure him out. She grinned up at him. "Things will go a lot more smoothly if you don't try to touch me any more."

He huffed a snort at that. Poor wolfie, she thought with no sympathy. She hefted her shoulder bag. "Might as well get this show on the road. I need to see your room."

"This way."

He led her a half dozen steps up the hall to a bedroom similar to hers in furnishings and number of windows. This one, however, rocked her the second she stepped inside. It throbbed with masculinity and a sense of determined authority. Pure alpha, Roderick had already set his stamp on his temporary den. She shut her eyes and sucked in a deep breath against the assault of his personality. *Stand firm, woman. You can take it.*

She opened her eyes and found the big bed right in front of her. Roderick's aura wafted enticingly from the rumpled covers. Thank Hecate he stood behind her and couldn't see her face.

But he could smell her reactions. She knew that by his low chuckle. "What did you have in mind?" he asked, infuriatingly bland.

"Wards," she decided. She moved to the dresser, safely away from the bed, and rummaged through her shoulder bag. She came up with three vials of powder in varying shades of yellow. "These should do."

"For what?"

"To keep anyone but you and me out of your room. Give me some of your hair."

He just looked at her. She plucked at her own thick mass until she had six red strands pooled in her palm. "For recognition," she said. "Like a key code." "Ah." He brushed at his shirt front and came up with a handful of stiff, black hairs. He dribbled these into her hand. "Shedding," he explained. "Nerves."

Almost at once Darinda's own hairs coiled protectively around Roderick's. Darinda frowned. That didn't normally happen. But then, she'd sworn to guard his life. Maybe her personal magic had bought into the sanctity of a witch's oath.

"Okay," she said, "that'll do. How strong do you want the protection?"

"What are my options?"

"Well, we can go for the standard alarm." She held up the vial of palest yellow. "Anyone breaks into the room, you'll hear it in your head, and the intruder will get a mild bioelectrical shock. This," she indicated the middle vial, "sets a net on the room. An intruder will be caught and held until one of us lets him go" She'd set the darkest vial to the side, and didn't touch it now. "This one's a nerve blast. It acts like a lightning strike. Total unconsciousness, with burns. Lets your enemies know you're not fooling around. If you want this one, we'll need to add blood."

He lifted his lip at the third vial. "The net. I want whoever's behind this alive for questioning. And I don't want Aunt Letty put in danger, even accidentally."

"Good choice." She put the unneeded vials away and dug out a plastic baggie. She emptied the chosen vial's contents into this, then brushed in the hairs. They dissolved almost immediately. Darinda shook the baggie for a good, thorough blend. "Once I lay this down," she warned, "no one can get in without one of us present. We might have to tell your aunt. Can we trust her not to tell her children?"

"No," Roderick said at once. "I'll ask her not to come in here. She's a bit overbearing, but she respects privacy. If it's one of my cousins who's after me, let them fend for themselves."

"All right." Darinda began sprinkling her concoction on the windowsills. It sank into the hardwood almost at once, leaving a faint trace of dandelions. The last of it she spread in a line at the threshold, while Roderick watched from the hall. "That's it. Now we let it set. You'll have to make your own bed from here on out."

She started downstairs. Roderick didn't move. "You haven't warded your room."

"I'm not the target. I'll be safe. I have other spells. C'mon, it sounds like your aunt has the tea ready."

Aunt Letty had set out a mini-buffet on the table in front of the sofa. Darinda eyed it with a sudden sinking feeling in her gut. The tea and shortbread posed no threats. However, the cookie tray sat beside a bowl of raw meat cubes, which sat beside a plate of crackers spread with some sort of beef paste. That wasn't tea-smell spiraling up from the cup Aunt Letty poured for Roderick, either. Why hadn't she anticipated this?

"Please sit down, dear," Aunt Letty invited. She offered Darinda a cup. "Sugar?"

"Just a spoonful." Thank Hecate the tea was tea. Like most witches, Darinda was vegetarian, though not a full-on vegan. She could eat eggs and even fish in a pinch. But if she had to work with carnivores for any length of time, things could get awkward. She settled herself on the sofa with a resigned little sigh. First chance she got, she'd have to lay in some emergency supplies.

Roderick, under no such dietary restrictions, plopped down beside her and dug up a handful of meat cubes, which he popped happily into his mouth. He growled his appreciation. "Venison. Fresh caught?"

Aunt Letty also growled. "Not in this city, not these days. There's a stand in the Italian Market that sells game. I think it comes from a farm." She primly took a seat on Darinda's other side and nibbled on the beef-and-crackers. "Now, dear, tell me who it is who's trying to kill poor Roddy."

Darinda reached for a cookie. "If we knew that already, you wouldn't need me. They knew his name, so we can rule out random. You mentioned your mother and sister."

"Doubtful," Roderick said. "They've kicked me out of England. You'd think that would be sufficient. I say it's the Duquesnes."

"I'm inclined to agree," Aunt Letty said reluctantly. "Coraline's a comely girl. Of course she'd attract male attention. Your jealous boyfriend theory makes sense. Very clever, Roddy."

Darinda, with half a mouthful of cookie, turned on him. "*Your* theory?" Roderick chewed a meat cube, unperturbed. "Okay. Maybe you should tell me about the Duquesnes."

"They're old allies of ours," Aunt Letty said. "We were a single pack once, but that was generations ago. They've only been here in the New World since, oh let me see, the late 1800s. Newcomers, really. The Chase family almost lost track of them, but now they seem eager to re-establish ties. I can't imagine they'd propose a mating and then try to kill the groom. Then again, they're French, which means they're capable of anything."

"Who proposed the mating?" Darinda said. "Coraline?"

"Oh, no. Her father did. Ellis, the Duquesne alpha. He made the initial overtures to Detty."

"So this was his idea."

"It's an alpha's duty to see his daughters make good matches. I know the rules are more relaxed here in America, but Ellis has always been firm on tradition."

"Only room for one alpha bitch in the pack," Roderick spoke up. "Duquesne's mate probably got too anxious having a younger she around. You should have seen the match the Queen Mum tried to arrange for Tamra. And what Tamra did to the poor bastard. His family's still not speaking to us."

"Later, Roddy. Anyway, you'll get to meet Ellis and the others tonight, so you can judge for yourself. If one of them is behind this, you'll sniff it out. You have spells for that, don't you, dear?"

Darinda went on the alert. "Tonight? What's tonight?"

"My dinner engagement with my future mate and my charming soon-tobe in-laws." He bit down hard on a chunk of meat. "You'll accompany me, of course."

"As what? Your date? No way in hell." She turned to Aunt Letty. "Tell him why such a move would be so monumentally stupid."

"But of course you're coming along, dear. Isn't that why Roddy hired you?"

"Oh, for Hecate's sake. Listen. I'm not that up on werewolf culture, but even I know a wolf doesn't walk into a full pack gathering with a strange human in tow. Especially if he's a male and the human's a female, and he's set to marry the alpha's daughter. Do you want to get us all slaughtered?"

"I thought you had spells," Roderick said.

"Common sense works better. I don't walk into death traps."

"Well, I have to. That's why I hired a bodyguard." He sat up. His new posture caused him to loom over her. Not coincidentally, she'd bet her broom. "Anyway, you're a witch. That's not quite a human."

"Thanks so much for the compliment. I'm still a non-were female. There's no way you can explain my presence that won't look like an insult." She thinned her eyes at him. "Or was that the idea?"

He lifted his lip, revealing a fang. "You're coming with me," he said. "You'll read them, or sense them, or whatever it is you do, and tell me which one has it in for me. I'll take matters from there."

"Absolutely not."

"Oh? You'll deal with it yourself? Thorough of you."

"You know damn well what I meant."

"Darinda." Aunt Letty patted her hand. "It's all right. I'll be there too, as Detty's proxy. They'll accept you. They'll have to, with Roddy and me to vouch for you. We won't let anything happen to you, and you do the same for Roddy."

Darinda stared at her. "I can't believe you'd go along with this."

"Why wouldn't I? It's a splendid idea. Throw them off their stride." Her eyes gleamed with the thrill of the hunt. "I never fully trusted them. French, you know."

"But—" Darinda slumped in defeat. Hecate's tits. There was just no way around wolf stubbornness. She refused to look at Roderick. If she saw that smug, triumphant grin she knew he was wearing, she'd end up slapping him. "Fine. I'll go. Now explain to me how you're going to explain me to them. Make it good, because I don't want us to die."

"I'm sure you'll think of something, dear. Roddy says you're very clever."

Darinda turned a laser-beam glare on him. "Does he?"

"Almost as clever as me," Roderick acknowledged. His arrogant smirk held enough wattage to light up South Street. She wanted to scream. "Because I'm the one who's just come up with a way to pull this off."

Chapter 6

"I still say this is a bad idea." Darinda's hands clutched the wheel. The Chrysler was Aunt Letty's car, but Darinda had been tapped as driver. She recognized it as a subordinate position, assigned to the lower ranks. That didn't bother her. Deliberately antagonizing another wolf pack did. "Let's do it this way. You two go in, I'll wait in the car. I can scan auras from there. It won't be as accurate as personal contact, but I'll do my best."

"You're coming in with us," Roderick said in a tone of finality. "You're to guarantee my safety, and I personally will guarantee yours. I doubt if they'll even acknowledge you. Let them sniff you, don't say much, and we'll get through the evening all right."

"They won't dare raise a fuss," Aunt Letty put in. "Not if they want this marriage to go through." She pressed a tissue to her nose. "Goodness, what's that odor? Lilacs? Is that you, dear?"

"Too strong?" Darinda said. Secretly, she hoped so. She'd added a touch of perfume right before they left, just tart enough to muddle her scent. She was tired of every wolf within noseshot being able to read her like the Sunday paper. "Sorry. That won't be a problem, will it?"

"I doubt it," Roderick said. "They'll expect as much from you. I rather like it. It makes you smell less like an ape."

Darinda bit off a sigh. Could nothing discourage him? The turnoff for the Duquesnes's home loomed ahead. She aimed for it, briefly imagining Roderick and his superior smirk framed in the headlights.

The Duquesnes had their home in Fairmount Park West, on the opposite side of the Schuylkill River from Meadowlands. The house at the end of the winding drive belonged to a more modern vintage, possibly 1900s. Nor was it as large as Aunt Letty's, though the grounds, what she could glimpse in the headlights, appeared just as meticulously kept. Where Meadowlands murmured of old wealth and prestige, Lupin Hill muttered middle class, and cast envious eyes across the Schuylkill.

Darinda parked in the spacious drive, between a black Buick and a red Corvette convertible she assumed belonged to Coraline. Before she could slide out from behind the wheel, Roderick laid his hand on her shoulder. "They may ignore you, but they'll be watching. Being ape automatically makes you low-rank. Hesitate, show any fear, and you'll have the whole pack on you."

"That might be a good thing. Less attention on you."

"They won't challenge me. Do what I say, when I say, and they'll accept you as part of my pack. They still won't like you, but you won't get bitten."

"Or I could wait in the car."

Roderick ignored her and climbed out of the car. He opened the door for Aunt Letty, then for Darinda, then strode to the front door and left them to follow.

These are wolves, Darinda reminded herself while she escorted Letty to the door. What's rude to us is natural behavior to them. Don't let it bug you. You're here on a job. Stay calm.

Calm she could do. Submissive, in the face of the rank-obsessed wolves...that might prove a bit tricky.

The young wolf who opened the door was clearly taken aback by Darinda's presence. His nose worked as fast as a rabbit's. He didn't growl—she gave him points for that—but she figured if she could see the back of his neck the hairs would be stiff as spikes. His stare finally left her to circle between Roderick and Aunt Letty. Low in rank, he struggled for direction.

Aunt Letty stepped up. This was a social milieu, and a delicate one. Her forte. "Is there a problem, young man?" she asked pleasantly.

"Uh." His gaze jumped back to Darinda.

"Let me rephrase that," Aunt Letty said. "Is there any good reason why you're holding invited guests on your doorstep?" She surged into the foyer without waiting for permission. This alpha act threw the poor young lowrank into further confusion. "Roderick Chase and Letitia Meadows to see the Duquesnes," she announced them. "Do be a dear and let them know we're here." Roderick entered without even a glance at the Duquesne wolf. He had his hand on Darinda's arm and drew her along in his wake. This time the wolf did growl. "You can't—" he started. Roderick glowered. "I mean, she can't. She can't come in. She's human."

"Miss Lowell is with me," Roderick said. *Mine. My pack. My property.* Darinda heard it in his tone and did a bit of bristling herself. She stomped it down with difficulty. "I trust that's not a problem?"

It was, and a big one, to judge by the young wolf's fidgeting. Decisions of this magnitude went beyond his rank. "I have to clear this," he said. "Wait here. Please," he added in afterthought at Aunt Letty's dangerous sniff. He darted from the room.

"Well," Roderick said, and shut the door. "That went well."

"The hell it did. I told you this was a bad idea."

"You're in, aren't you? That's half the battle there. Now you just have to ascertain which one of them wants me dead."

"That part's a snap. All of them, after this. And Letty and me along with you."

"Nonsense, dear," Aunt Letty said. "No one starts a blood feud at a dinner party. Not even the French. It's bad form."

"No one's touching either of you," Roderick growled. His voice had that proprietary note in it again, like he'd claimed her or something. Like he thought he had the right. He rubbed his nose. "Darinda, watch the nerves. Your scent's spiking."

"Gee, sorry. Getting hauled into a pack of hostile werewolves makes me twitchy. We'd better hope it's one of them so we can wrap this up quick."

"Of course it must be," Aunt Letty said. "Who else is there?"

Darinda was spared answering that by the return of the young low-rank. He had a second, older wolf beside him. The other wolf sniffed them all, her in particular, although he didn't look at her directly. He addressed himself to Aunt Letty, with a smile of genuine pleasure. "Letty Meadows. Our packs don't see enough of each other these days. I understand there's an irregularity?"

"My doing." Roderick glided forward. "Miss Lowell here is my personal physician. She goes where I go."

"Physician?" The wolf sniffed her again, more thoroughly this time. His yellow eyes widened. "You're a witch. Lowell...the witch from South Street?"

"Darinda," she said, with a big friendly smile. "Sorry about the disturbance. We should have called ahead and checked with you first." Which she had suggested, except Roderick had wanted the Duquesnes offbalance. The minute the evening ended, she promised herself, he was getting a kick in the shins.

"Well, everything's all right, then. Big Alex has given you clearance. That's good enough for me. I'm Albert Duquesne, Ellis's beta. You must be Roderick Chase. We've been looking forward to meeting you."

"I'm looking forward to meeting Coraline." They shook hands. Darinda watched with interest. It was less a greeting than at test of strength to find out who ranked where. When it came to male behavior, species didn't seem to matter. Albert Duquesne let go first, apparently satisfied. He flicked another glance Darinda's way. "Physician, huh? Do you have a medical condition we should know about?"

"A temporary one. It came on rather suddenly and unexpectedly. I thought it prudent to engage a professional."

"Nothing life-threatening, I hope."

Roderick smiled thinly. "I hope so too."

"As long as it isn't contagious. We had a distemper scare last year."

"He's clean," Darinda said. "Your pack's in no danger."

"All right, then." Albert stepped away. "What say we meet the family?"

He led the way from the foyer. Aunt Letty followed, then Roderick, then Darinda. The sullen young wolf brought up the rear. He crowded so hard on Darinda's heels that when she stopped he nearly ran her down. "I'm a witch, you know," she murmured to him, low-voiced so the others wouldn't hear. "I appreciate you want to protect your pack. But if you don't get off my feet, and my case, I'll turn you into a bichon frise. Are we clear?"

The young wolf backed off hastily, and Darinda continued on her way. Every interaction with wolves, she reminded herself, was a test of dominance, a jockeying for rank. If she stayed unobtrusive and didn't show fear, they all might make it through dinner.

Ellis and Nora, the Duquesne alpha pair, greeted their guests in the den. They were friendly to Aunt Letty, guardedly polite to Roderick. Since they'd been tipped off to Darinda's presence, they didn't give her any grief. They also ignored her. Roderick occupied the bulk of their interest. As a new addition to the pack, he posed a threat to the others' standing, perhaps even to the leadership itself. Darinda carefully watched them watch him. Who among the Duquesnes might value their rank enough to commit murder to keep it?

Tonight's suspects numbered six. Besides Ellis and Nora there was betawolf Albert and the alpha pair's three cubs: teenage twins Bentley and Camilla, and twentysomething Coraline, the prospective bride. Seven suspects, if one counted the low-rank who'd answered the door. Darinda noticed he wasn't introduced any more than she was.

She zeroed in on Coraline. The Duquesne debutante was tall, blonde and striking, with angular features and muscles she hadn't developed hefting tennis racquets and credit cards. She'd been poured into a glittery black dress that accented her athletic body. She planted herself at Roderick's side as if she meant to live there. Her parents looked on approvingly.

Darinda had to admit golden Coraline and the dark, suave Roderick made a handsome pair. An unexpected pang at that observation hit her in the gut. Now who was feeling proprietary? Darinda took a breath and squared her shoulders. She had no claim on Roderick, and didn't want any. Theirs was a business relationship.

Speaking of business, time to get to work. The wolves had clustered around Roderick and Coraline, with watchful Albert on the periphery. Since no one seemed inclined to talk to her, she picked the young wolf as her target. "Sorry about the bichon frise crack," she said, and extended her hand. "I'm Darinda Lowell. I didn't get your name."

He stared at her hand like it stank. He clearly didn't want to be anywhere near her. Too bad. "Are you Ellis's son? Or Albert's?" she persisted.

That brought his eyes up. "Why are you talking to me?"

"Because it looks like we're in the same boat. Are you going to tell me your name?"

"Cole Duquesne," he said in a resigned mumble. His gaze slid away from hers and settled on the floor. "I'm from the Wissahickon branch of the pack. I'm staying here while I go to school." Aha. The poor relation. Were packs had a name for them. Omegas. Darinda withdrew her unshaken hand. "So you're...?"

"Ellis and Albert's nephew. Or cousin. Or something like that. We're all related. Not brother-sister close, but the bloodlines are kind'a tangled up. That's why they're so hot to have Coraline marry outside the pack."

She followed his glance toward Roderick and Coraline, chatting away amiably enough beside the hearth. "Pickings must be slim if they had to send away to England," Darinda remarked.

Cole shrugged. "It's been in the wind for a while. His alpha and Uncle Ellis go way back."

"As long as she's okay with it."

"No reason she wouldn't be. Beats hunting up a mate on her own."

He watched the happy couple while Darinda watched his face. No hate or hostility there, only wistful longing. "Lucky dog," he said abruptly.

"How so?"

"He gets to mate. Maybe even breed one day. They've loosened up the rules, you know. All the upper ranks can take mates now, not just the alphas."

Which didn't help Cole any, Darinda guessed. Not if he sat low on the ladder. Denied power, denied a mate, denied a pack of his own. Denied Coraline? Had an omega's frustrations nudged him over the edge?

The object of their mutual attention laughed at some witticism of Roderick's. The noise was shrill as claws on glass and went on a beat too long. Cole's lip curled. "And then sometimes low rank's a blessing. You don't get saddled with some yappy, high-strung she who'll drive you scatty. Better him than me." He slanted a sly look at Darinda. "Or you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nice job with the perfume. It messes up your scent. But I've got eyes. I saw you get all stiff and frowny when Coraline moved in on Chase."

Darinda stiffened and frowned. "I'm only here to look out for his health. I couldn't care less one way or the other."

"Hey, it's okay. No shame in being a fur freak. Lots of monkeys are."

"I am not a fur freak!"

Unfortunately her denial came out a touch too loud, right into a lull in the conversation. The entire pack stared at her. Roderick's eyebrows climbed. If he smirks, she thought, I'll kill him.

Albert cleared his throat. "I believe dinner's ready."

Ellis gathered up his family with a nod and strode from the room. The Duquesnes fell in behind, in rank order. All but Coraline, who had welded herself to Roderick's arm. He motioned for Aunt Letty to precede him, then glanced back to include Darinda. Sure enough, he smirked.

"You are so dead," she muttered under her breath. Face burning, she allowed the grinning Cole to escort her from the den.

Given their heritage, it didn't surprise Darinda to discover the dining room was the largest and most elaborate room in Lupin Hill. The hunt and subsequent communal dining were cornerstones of were culture. The table filled nearly the length of the room and had been set up family style, with plates and bowls of food to be passed from member to member. Meat accounted for the bulk of the dishes, a lot of it tartare. Thank Hecate she'd had the foresight to tuck some granola bars into her bag.

The wolves seated themselves, again according to rank: Ellis at the head of the table, Nora on one side of him, Albert on the other. Aunt Letty took the seat beside Albert. Coraline sat next to her mother and pulled Roderick down beside her. When Darinda tried to claim the seat at Roderick's other side, both Nora and Coraline scowled. Roderick shook his head minutely. Well, fine. She took the chair two seats away, leaving sufficient space between the prickly wolves and her annoying humanity.

A brief scuffle ensued between the twins over who would sit beside Aunt Letty and consequently closer to the alpha. Camilla won. She preened in her seat while Bentley slouched next to her. He wasn't so dejected he couldn't shoot a growl at Cole when the omega tried to sit next to him. Cole skipped a seat and took the chair opposite Darinda.

Conversation ended when dinner began. Wolves, Darinda observed, took their feeding seriously. Ellis, as alpha male, began the meal. All plates were passed to him first. He ceremoniously placed the choicest cuts on Nora's plate. From there the food made its way around the table to the other family members and the guests.

Mostly. Very little reached Cole and Darinda at the omega end of the table. Cole made a grab for a plate of roast beef and earned a slap from Bentley. He backed down with no protest, but his eyes smoldered. Roderick, Darinda noticed, saw to it the few grain and vegetable selections made it down to her. She also discovered she was receiving the rarest, bloodiest cuts

of meat, courtesy of the sneering twins. These she passed to Cole. He flashed her a quick, grateful smile.

The twins noticed this and didn't like it. The meat stopped coming her way. "Sorry we don't have any bananas," Camilla said with a bright baring of teeth.

Or manners, Darinda projected directly into her head, and had the satisfaction of hearing the little bitch yelp. Telepathy was one of her minor skills and one she never misused, but sometimes you just had to go for it. Especially when some snotty mutt wouldn't stop nipping at you.

You sorry witch, she berated herself only seconds later. You're no wolf. Rank's unimportant. Use your magic on something that matters. Like ferreting out a would-be murderer.

With appetites now sated, conversing resumed in laughter, small talk, and lots of gossip. Nora and Letty monopolized the latter. The twins listened attentively. Roderick's attention was split between Albert's pointed inquiries and the vivacious Coraline. Relaxed, full-fed, at ease, the wolves would have their guards down. No one paid her the slightest attention. Now would be the perfect time.

Darinda took a sip of water and went aura-sniffing.

This wasn't her favorite method of divining secrets, nor was it the most accurate. A touch would tell her more. However, in this crowd even a casual touch could get her arm ripped off at the elbow. Better safe than maimed. She let her physical eyes unfocus and her inner eye take over.

The room took on an overlay of red. Powerful excitement, greed. That she expected from a room full of carnivores high on the reek of meat. Hard, black streaks darted through the red, indicating suspicion and hostility, aimed her way. She tried not to take it personally. "Witch" equaled "human" in the were vocabulary, and a shared heritage of persecution didn't win her any brownie points.

Nothing on the surface. She'd have to dig deeper.

She narrowed her focus until she had each participant pinpointed. Cole, closest to her, radiated anxious orange, his resentment over his position assuaged somewhat by food. The twins roiled purple with restless energy. They were bored and longed to escape. Letty, in her element, glowed serenely blue. Albert's darker, watchful blue was punctuated by a yellow

undercurrent of general alertness. Some of that he directed at Roderick, but no more than one would expect from a beta concerned for his alpha's safety.

On to the key players, then. She focused on the alpha pair.

Right off she noted excitement. They didn't want Roderick dead. Far from it. Their interest stank of sour desperation. They wanted Roderick in their pack so bad even Darinda could taste it, bad enough to crawl like lowrankers before Bernadette Chase in order to set this up. She averted her mental eye from the harsh yellow-green of their auras.

She could scratch Nora and Ellis off the suspect list. How about the prize in this game? Darinda fixed her attention on Coraline.

Heat. Hunger and heat. Coraline burned crimson, a Krakatoa of lust just looking for an excuse to erupt. She liked her fun and she liked it fast and hard. At the moment she liked Roderick with an intensity that seared Darinda's senses around the edges. She pulled back hastily and downed a gulp of water.

Okay, so Coraline wasn't out to kill him—not by traditional methods, anyway. Small wonder her parents were desperate to marry her off.

Desperation seemed to power all three wolves. Beneath Coraline's fiery mating urge Darinda had sensed that same anxiety that tainted the alphas' auras. She was just a bit too eager in her interest, as if Roderick were her only chance and she'd better make the most of it, a feeling shared and encouraged by Ellis and Nora.

Surely Coraline had other options. Other packs inhabited the area. Bucks County was practically rife with them. Were the Duquesnes that determined to forge an alliance with the Chases? One had to wonder why.

And Darinda had to wonder what Roderick thought of it all.

Just a peek. One quick glimpse and out. Get his take on matters. She set her senses on probe again and had a "look" at Roderick.

Sex, hot and raw, hit her hard. Sex and impatience. His aura burned nearly as red as Coraline's, churned by frustration and wanting. A great black beast chafing at a leash he couldn't slip and so had decided to chew through. How could he contain such primal emotion? She marveled at his self-restraint.

Of course she should have expected this. Roderick was a healthy male, in close proximity to a healthy female of his own kind sending out blatant come-hither signals. He'd have to be dead not to respond.

Except it wasn't Coraline he was responding to.

Wouldn't even romp in a bolt-hole with this skittery twit what was Mother thinking smells all wrong can't take the bloody politicking –

That wasn't aura. That was words in her head, along with sensations and emotions and a hundred other things that shouldn't be happening. The image that held center stage in his head shouldn't be there either. With a start she recognized herself, as his eyes and his nose perceived her, fully naked and with far more hair than she'd ever worn in her life. His want stabbed into her and demanded she reciprocate.

Attracted by the force of him, her magic boiled up, questing after the source. So few beings could match the power of a witch. Their auras tangled like lusting bodies eager to steal pleasure from each other. Phantom nipples hardened under the rasp of a spirit tongue. Her astral hand made an exploratory lunge between the werewolf's legs.

Hecate's tits!

Darinda wrenched herself away and thrust her consciousness back in her body. The room spiraled in front of her eyes. Focus, she ordered herself. Focus on the physical. Unfortunately, the most overwhelmingly physical thing closest to her was –

"Darinda?" Roderick said.

Her water glass shattered in her hand.

For a moment she stared stupidly at the wet shards of glass in her palm and on her plate. Only gradually did she become aware of the rest of the table. Every yellow eye and every nose was aimed at her. The twins looked startled. Cole edged back from the table.

"Are you all right, dear?" Letty asked.

"I'm—" She cleared her throat and tried again. "Something went down wrong. May I be excused?" Without waiting for alpha permission she got up and bolted from the room.

* * * *

When Darinda fled the dining room, Roderick automatically started to rise. Her scent had spiked dramatically in a matter of seconds. She must have found something out, something that upset her. A monumental something, or she wouldn't have pelted away from the table like that. His instincts demanded he follow, offer comfort and protection to a she of his pack, as an alpha should.

Coraline hauled on his arm. "Let her go. So the ape's got a bellyache. She won't die from it."

He snarled at her, right in front of her parents, and didn't give a bite. "That woman is keeping me alive so you can have yourself a healthy husband. You will show her respect." He shook her off and started after Darinda.

Ellis started up, his teeth showing. "Now just a minute."

"Easy." Albert laid a placating hand on his brother's arm. "I'll deal with it. You two finish your meal." He rose and coolly trailed Darinda from the dining room.

Roderick would have gone after her anyway, and Lycaon bite the Duquesnes, but Aunt Letty's soft warning growl forbade it. This wasn't about his desires, that growl reminded him. This was about the good of two packs. He settled back onto his chair, face tight and inwardly seething.

"All right, the *woman*." Coraline dismissed Darinda with a shrug. "Forget about her. She'll be fine. You know how fragile they are."

Fragile? Ha. Not that one. Darinda had the heart and spirit of a wolf, trapped in a simian body. Strength to spare. Not unlike the ghastly perfume Coraline had doused herself in. What did she call it? Rutting Elk? It made him want to vomit, or rip his own nose off, or both. Did the word "subtle" not exist in the American lexicon?

Soothed by his anxious mate, Ellis smoothed his hackles down and went back to that let's-all-be-good-fellows-about-this heartiness that set Roderick's teeth on edge. Its stench battered him almost as mercilessly as Coraline's hideous perfume. And Mother wanted to strike a deal with these fawning tuck-tails? She must despise him beyond measure.

"A week from Saturday all right?" Ellis said.

"I'm sorry?"

"For the wedding. I was thinking the back yard would do for the ceremony. It ought to hold all of us. Unless, of course, you'd prefer to hold it at Meadowlands. Letty?"

"We've plenty of ground," Letty agreed. "My daughter Lorraine was married there. There's one corner of the garden that catches the moon just right." Roderick counted days on his fingers under the table. "A week from Saturday? That's awfully sudden."

"I don't see any reason to delay," Ellis said. "Bernadette's okayed everything. We'd better notify her, in case she wants to attend. Whatever's good for you."

He mentally snorted. Good for him? Returning to England and his home territory would be good for him. Sinking his teeth into his mother and shaking her like a rat would be immensely good. Freeing himself from the clutches of this wretched smelly she and her cloying pack would do him a world of good.

Holding Darinda in his arms so he could drink in her unique scent and revel in her warmth would do him the most good of all.

"It's settled, then," Ellis announced. "The marriage will take place at Meadowlands a week from Saturday. I think that's even a full moon. Lycaon's smiling on all of us."

Coraline squealed and shoved herself up against his side. He forced a smile into the face of the assault from her perfume and wondered what Darinda had found out and if she was all right.

* * * *

Away from the psychic and sensory overload, Darinda managed to get her heart rate back down to near-normal levels. Shaking off the effects of Roderick's blatant desire wasn't so easy. He'd gotten inside her, and that shouldn't have happened. She was more careful than that. Or had always been in the past.

Her headlong flight had taken her back to the foyer. She yanked the front door open, stuck her head outside, and sucked in long, desperate drags of night air. Come on, she cursed the air. *You're supposed to help out*.

"I knew I should have waited in the car," she muttered under her breath.

"Please. Don't go just yet. I want to talk to you for a moment."

"I wasn't leaving. I just needed some air." Darinda shut the door and turned to face Albert Duquesne. "I apologize for that. I hope Ellis isn't angry."

"No more so than usual. We were all a bit put out that Roderick would bring a human with him." "He wanted a doctor. It was kind of short notice. We really should have called ahead."

"It's done." Albert waved that off. He narrowed his shrewd eyes at her. "This 'condition' of his you're supposed to be treating wouldn't be lead poisoning, would it? Or silver poisoning?"

That cleared her head in a hurry. "You're well informed."

"I need to be. It's easy with a were on the force. And then there's you. The city's got dozens of qualified vets, and Letty knows the best. A were wouldn't hire a witch to treat a medical condition. He might hire one to scope out the pack he's marrying into." He chuckled. "Can't say I blame him. His mother never put a paw down without sniffing the ground ahead first. He's Bernadette's pup, all right."

"You don't miss a trick."

"Can't afford to. I'm responsible for Ellis's safety. Hiring a witch. Huh. I should have thought of that."

Something in his tone tipped her off. "Why? Has your family had any recent brushes with...lead poisoning?"

"Nothing so direct. Just little things like accidents, near misses. Could be nothing." Albert growled low down in his throat. He didn't believe it. "Then a wolf with ties to the family gets shot at. A good beta has to ask questions. You understand?"

"Perfectly." Darinda smiled. "Does this mean you'd like an alliance?"

"An exchange of information will do. We keep each other up to speed on anything off-kilter. You rub my belly, I rub—" He broke off at her raised brows. "Not literally. It's a were idiom."

"I figured. When did the 'accidents' start, and who's been the target?"

"We've all had brushes. Ellis, Nora and me."

"Not Coraline?"

"You think she's responsible, don't you?"

"Either her or a jealous boyfriend. Best theory I could come up with."

"Let me set your mind at ease. Coraline's all for the match and has been from the beginning. As far as a boyfriend, well, Nora's been keeping a close eye on her since her first heat. There's no one. We made sure."

"No one that you know of."

"There's no one," Albert insisted. His lip lifted, just a little. "Nora would know. We don't need any loose litters."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to question your abilities. I'm just covering all the angles."

"I understand. We've got the same job, in a way." The lifted lip became a smile. "In answer to your other question, those 'accidents' have been happening since before Roderick arrived. Brushes with humans, mostly. Males picking fights, cars coming at us in the street... Nothing that smells like an outright attack, but when you factor in last night it looks suspicious."

"We may have a common enemy," Darinda concluded. "A human. So why target the Duquesnes?"

Albert shrugged. "You've got me. We stay clear of humans, as a rule. Yes, that includes Coraline. She wouldn't run with a human male. Nora would never allow it."

Scratch that theory, then. "Have you reported this to Big Alex?"

"Reported what? Belligerent apes and bad drivers? Throw a stick in Center City, you'll hit a dozen of both. We can't even prove the attack last night was directly connected to us. It's all conjecture at this point."

Darinda nodded. "I'll keep my eyes open. If I learn anything, I'll let you know. I'm staying at Meadowlands. You can reach me there."

On impulse, she held out her hand. Albert eyed it, then grasped it firmly. The brief touch confirmed her assumptions. Albert was sincere, concerned, and devoted to his brother and his brother's family and their safety. All he'd told Darinda was truth, or as much of the truth as he knew.

This certainly threw a spanner into her reading. The cards insisted the danger came from someone close to Roderick. With the Duquesnes off the list, that left Letty's brood. He wouldn't like that at all.

Speak of the yellow-eyed devil. Roderick practically burst into the foyer with Coraline hard on his heels. She scowled at Darinda. He scowled at Albert. "Are you well?" he barked at Darinda.

"Better," she said. "It wasn't anything serious. I'm going to go out and sit in the car." *Like I should have done in the first place*.

"No need for that. We'll be going shortly."

Sure enough, she spotted the alpha pair behind him, all smiles, carrying their coats. "Already?" Darinda said.

"We've concluded our business. Now the real work begins." Roderick's smile was strained. "After all, I'm getting married in eight days."

Chapter 7

Darinda insisted she was well enough to drive. That was only partially true. By now the blunt force of Roderick's desire had fuzzed a bit at the edges. That still left her nerves jumping and an annoying heat in her groin, but nothing she couldn't suppress as long as he didn't touch her. Or talk to her, or look at her, or get within fifty feet of her. Other than that, yes, she could drive a car. She climbed in behind the wheel before either Roderick or Aunt Letty could protest. Philadelphia's traffic would give her something to fix on other than the wolf beside her.

With Lupin Hill safely behind them, Darinda made her report. "You can relax. They're not out to kill you. As a matter of fact, they seemed eager to welcome you into the fold. Almost desperate, if you ask me. Any idea why?"

"Why wouldn't they? I'm quite the catch." Roderick's dry snort dispelled any trace of ego. "Young, rich, good-looking, from a wellrespected and powerful pack. Just the star they wouldn't mind hitching their daughter to. Not a moment too soon, either. I thought she was going to have me right there at the table."

"Roddy!" Aunt Letty yipped from the back seat.

"Don't you 'Roddy' me. You could smell it as well as I could. Or maybe you couldn't through that cloud of musk she'd dunked herself in. If they want me to marry her, they'll have to bathe her first."

"She was a bit pungent," Aunt Letty admitted. "But other than that, she's a perfectly lovely girl."

"One step away from heat. What were they thinking, letting her run loose? I can't believe even Americans would be so gauche."

"Keep in mind, Roddy, they are French."

"I had a chat with Albert," Darinda went on, "and Roderick may not be the only target. Albert says the Duquesnes have had some close calls recently. Nothing as blatant as a shooting, but enough to put him on notice. The signs point to a non-were."

"The Duquesnes too?" Aunt Letty said. "Oh dear."

"So they're not after me specifically?" Roderick said. "Imagine my relief." Another snort.

"If I were you, I'd take this seriously. An outsider targeting weres is nothing to sniff at. You might have to call Big Alex after all."

"Not just yet," Roderick said. "It could be a jealous human suitor, like you said."

"Albert says no. He says Coraline never ran with humans."

Snort the third. "A lot he knows about shes, then. A bitch that far gone would roll with a—"

"Watch out!"

Darinda had just begun the climb up the drive to Meadowlands when something darted into the glare of the headlights. She slammed on the brakes. Aunt Letty yelped. Roderick, who had disdained his seat belt, was nearly thrown into the dash.

Darinda peered through the windshield. She got a glimpse of four long legs, a grayish body, pointed ears and nose, a straggly tail. The creature bounded across the road and disappeared.

"What the bloody hell!" Roderick roared.

"Something ran in front of me." Darinda focused on the brush beside the drive and came up empty. "Dog, I think."

Aunt Letty leaned forward anxiously. "You're sure it wasn't—"

"One of the family? No, I know what weres look like. This was too small and spindly. Do you have strays around here?"

Letty didn't answer. Roderick huffed out a breath. "You're feeding them again, aren't you? Eugene tells me you once had a whole pack in the garden. Charlie ended up calling the pound."

"It's lonely with the pups all gone. And they're so pathetic, out there on their own. You have to take pity on the poor things. I imagine humans feel the same way about chimpanzees. Don't you, dear?"

"More or less," Darinda said. She started the car up the drive again, at a much more cautious pace.

The house was quiet and empty. Nothing had disturbed the wards. Aunt Letty trotted at once for the kitchen. "I could use some tea. How about you, dear? Did you get enough to eat? Do you want something?"

"I'm good, thanks. Roderick made sure I got served." She met his noncommittal gaze. He'd opted to put his faith in a stranger; the least she could do was reciprocate. "I suppose it's apparent, huh?"

"That you're an herbivore? To our noses, yes. A meat diet adds a certain tang to even a primate's odor. It's missing from yours. It wasn't hard to draw the obvious conclusion."

"Will that be a problem?"

"For us? Not at all. Meat's for the wolf. Our human forms need variety. You won't starve. You might encounter problems with other weres, however. We hunt things that smell like you."

"Try some beef gravy, dear," Aunt Letty said from the kitchen. "Just a little rubbed onto the skin so you don't smell so much like an entrée."

"Uh, thanks. I'll keep it in mind."

The three of them sipped herbal tea while Letty laid the groundwork for the upcoming nuptials. Roderick offered few opinions. He seemed lost in his own morose thoughts. Darinda dawdled over her tea for a polite interval, then finished it off and excused herself. She wasn't at all surprised to hear Roderick pad softly up the stairs behind her.

She stopped before his room to inspect the wards. "They've set nicely," she murmured in satisfaction. "They'll hold for a week, then need to be renewed. Hopefully we'll have this all wrapped up by then."

"Assuming I live that long." He gestured curtly toward the room, as much an order as an invitation. The look in his eyes said business only. Silently Darinda stepped within.

Roderick followed and shut the door. "Now. Tell me what you wouldn't say in front of Aunt Letty."

"I touched Albert, so I got a good connection. He told me the truth. The Duquesnes want this marriage. They certainly don't want you dead. Albert swears Coraline doesn't have a boyfriend, human or otherwise."

"Yes, she made certain to impress on me how available she is. So we're back to square one."

"Your cousins."

"Letty's pups." He growled softly. "I appreciate your discretion."

"I can't change the reading. The cards insist it's someone close to you." Darinda considered. "That implies family, but it doesn't have to. I understand you've left quite a trail of human lovers behind you."

"Not in this country."

"Doesn't matter. You might have a long-distance enemy. Somebody who waited until you were gone before they made their move. I'm sure you know the one about a woman scorned."

"It takes money to hire assassins, especially long-distance. None of the mon—that is, the women I dallied with had those kinds of resources."

"It doesn't take much. A few emails, a couple hundred transferred between accounts... You'd be amazed what people will do, and for how little. Or the connections you can make on the Internet. My partner at the store talked me into online dating once, but you don't want to hear about that."

"I might, when this is done with. All right. Let's assume one of my romps has come back to haunt me. What has she got against the Duquesnes, then? If it's true they're also under attack."

"That does kind of goop up the works. I can't think of any connection other than the wedding. You're the common element. It has to be someone you know."

"Only one thing to do, then. Eugene owes me a night on the town, as the last was so rudely interrupted. We'll get the pack together for a proper reunion. You'll come along and work your magic and find which one of my relatives wants me put down. We'll flip a coin to see who tells Aunt Letty."

"I'm not looking forward to that. Any of it." Darinda practically growled herself. "Will they bite me if I touch them?"

"Lucy might. Eugene will no doubt enjoy it."

"Great. Okay, you set it up. What if it's one of them?"

"I'll deal with it. One other thing. At the dinner table tonight..."

Uh-oh. "Yes?" she asked cautiously.

"I could have sworn I heard your voice. Inside my head, I mean. Just a whisper. I'm not sure you were even talking to me."

"Just my voice? Nothing else?"

"Why, was there more?"

"No," she said quickly. Thank Hecate he hadn't noticed. "I have some minor telepathic power. I used it tonight to help scan the Duquesnes. Maybe you caught an echo or something. I assure you, it wasn't intentional."

He stared at her just long enough to provoke a touch of sweat on her brow. Then he nodded. "This could prove an advantage," he said. "Increase communication. One of the drawbacks of the wolf form is a marked lack of speaking ability. I don't suppose you understand were?"

"Too rough on my throat. Do I have your permission, then? I don't want to just go diving into your head."

"Of course you have permission. You're trying to keep me alive. You can do whatever you need to. I thought that was understood."

She nodded mutely. She'd managed not to look at him too much throughout the conversation. Whatever remained in her eyes as a result of his psychic swell, she'd rather he didn't see it. She found herself looking at the clock on the dresser instead. Quarter to eleven. Set A Spell's real customers would be crawling out of their coffins and basements and shadows for a chat and a laugh and whatever arcane needs they wanted met. She should be there for them, doing the work that fulfilled her, secure in her place of power. Not playing detective in a room that seemed so suddenly tiny now that it had the wolf in it.

As if reading her mind, he said, "We need a break from this." His gaze followed hers to the clock. "It's early yet, at least for our kind. I'm sure we can think of something to do."

Warily, she asked him, "Such as?"

He flashed her a smile. "Care to go walkies?"

* * * *

This wasn't Darinda's first stroll along Kelly Drive, just her first after full dark, as well as her first with a werewolf. As an escort, Roderick definitely fell down on the job. He'd trot briefly at her side before dashing off to investigate some foreign smell or movement. Like walking a puppy, she thought. Although this puppy would probably rip her arm off if she suggested a leash.

Fortunately they hadn't run afoul of anyone so far. People used the footpath even at this time of night, in the singular more than the plural: latenight joggers, strollers, the occasional couple. The restless, the worried, the homeless, the lonely. And the predators.

She knew when a pair of teens fell in step behind her, and murmured under her breath. They got within six feet and suddenly veered around her. She slowed and let them pass. Their faces held vague, distracted expressions, as if they'd forgotten why they'd come out here. A truck rattled across a bridge up ahead, and they stopped to fixate on the sound, their mouths agape like fish. Their stupor would end shortly. By then Darinda would be gone.

A low *whurff* at her heels alerted her to Roderick's presence. She hadn't heard him approach. "The benefits of magic," she told him. "No one gets close to me unless I allow it. And where were you while my life could have been in danger? Or your own, for that matter."

His eyes glowed in the gloom. *Nearby* brushed the surface of her thoughts. Then he stuck his nose in the breeze and loped off to investigate some enticing odor down at the water's edge. Darinda shook her head.

Since pre-midnight still counted as "early," she pulled out her cell phone without breaking stride. "You've reached Set A Spell," Peri answered. "If you're a zombie, press one."

"Relax, it's me."

"Dar? Thank Gawd. The mummy dust shipment finally came in. I've got June from Camden helping out, and you know what a klutz she is. I've managed to keep her away from the breakables. Oh, you know the Merlin tapestry? Norman almost set it on fire. We caught it right as it started to smolder. Can you talk to him or something? Ever since you left he's been hyper. His spines are all orange."

"Can you get him to the phone?"

"Sure, lemme get my oven mitts. Hold on." The receiver made a clunk. Darinda slowed to an amble and listened to Peri stomp around the shop, yelling at Norman to keep his scales on, she'll be right with you. This was followed by grunts and puffing, as of a slightly-built young girl hefting a bulky lizard in her arms. "Okay, here he is."

"Thanks, Peri. Hey, baby, it's mommy. How's my boy? Who's the bestest fella in the whole wide world?"

Roderick padded up to her with a quizzical half-lift of his lip. "Relax," Darinda said. "I'm talking to my dragon. He's insecure." The black wolf huffed and loped off. "Peri? How's he doing?"

"Code green. We're good again. Really, Dar, you should get a cat."

The path, and Darinda, passed beneath the Girard Avenue overpass. Up ahead Roderick bristled at something across the street. Darinda came abreast of him and spotted Remington's *The Cowboy* atop his bronze horse, riding herd on passing traffic. "It's just a statue," she said without stopping. "You really are jumpy, aren't you?"

"Who, me? Just because I'm holding a dragon with separation issues who could go inferno any second?"

"No, no, not you. Roderick. The werewolf. He's still convinced somebody's out to get him."

"Oh, right. Mr. Sexy British Accent. So how's the whole bodyguard thing working out? You gone to bed with him yet?"

"No!" Damn pixies. Bring in a man and they tunnel-vision. "I'm not going to, either. It's a business relationship and that's it."

Peri giggled. "Business, right. That's how it starts."

"If you had wings, I'd pull them off. Now listen. There may be something to this. The Duquesne pack's had a couple close shaves. That's the pack Roderick's marrying into. Someone may be hunting weres in general, and it may be a human. Any word on the street?"

Peri sobered instantly. "I haven't heard anything. I'll ask the vamps. You know them. Biggest gossips on the planet. Can I put Norman down now? He's heavy."

"If he isn't smoking, sure. I'll try to find time to stop in." Roderick, once more at her side, growled an objection. "Stop it. You don't own me. Not you, the wolf."

"You want backup? June can watch the store. I'll just tie everything down."

"Thanks, but I think we're good. Have you heard from Paul? Sometimes he knows when I'm in trouble before I do."

"He hasn't called here." Darinda could hear Peri's pout through the phone. "I still think your werewolf's overeacting. He just wanted to get you up to his den so he could have his way with you. You should let him. Have some fun for once. I'll pay cash money for details. I'll bet werewolf hickeys are—"

"Good night, Peri."

Maybe she ought to revise her assessment, Darinda thought as she returned her phone to her pocket. Maybe she and Roderick weren't as well off as she figured. She had a sense of menace at her back. And that jogger up ahead at one of the picnic tables had passed her twice already. He wasn't too good of a jogger. He made lots of puffing and painful grunts and had no form whatsoever. As a muscle man, however, he'd be more than sufficient. Darinda didn't like that a bit.

She also didn't like the way Roderick kept glancing behind them and growling over his shoulder. She sent a probe that way and hit a malevolence so sharp it stopped her dead. Not human. The presence left a sensation of fur on her tongue. Canine. A were.

Well, that answered that. "There's a were behind us," she murmured.

By the cowboy statue? That's what I thought. I knew I felt eyes on me.

She squinted, but couldn't spot anything, were or otherwise. "Anyone you know?"

I couldn't get a clear enough scent. Too much auto exhaust. It doesn't feel like a wolf, though. This is different. Thinner, somehow.

"A jackal?" Darinda wondered. At least one clan of jackals had established a den outside Germantown. One of them worked in the coroner's office. Charlie had told her about him. "Let's turn around and head back. Stick close to me. Pretend you don't know he's there. Let's see what he does."

They reversed direction and retraced their steps in a casual amble. Instantly the "jogger" hopped up from his seat and made long, loud strides to catch up with them. At the same moment two men at another picnic table, whom she'd taken for a gay couple, suddenly abandoned both the table and their assumed interest in each other and started toward her, shoulder to shoulder.

The humans had them cut off in front and behind. The were held Kelly Drive. That left a dash across the grass and a dive into the Schuylkill, a perilous act in itself. "I know," she answered Roderick's snarl. "Watch this."

A London Werewolf in America

She murmured her spell. Just like the teens earlier, the two men slowed, then moved to sidestep. They stopped and shook their heads with mumbled curses in Jersey accents. They kept on coming.

Watch what? Roderick grumbled in her head.

Ohhhh crap. They must be shielded. Darinda halted. Roderick halted. The pair advancing on her halted. At her back the "jogger" halted and wheezed for breath.

"Okay," she said, "we all know what's what here. Are there any more of you? No? Then tell me what it is you want."

The tag team deferred to the man behind her. He, in turn, glanced across the street. Darinda followed that glance to *The Cowboy*. She spotted the eyes first, glowing gold within the gloom of the trees. The rest of the were skulked out to crouch beside the statue's base. A were, but not a wolf. Not as big or solidly-built as Roderick. Longer legs and muzzle, narrower tail, lean to the point of scrawny. Very much like the animal that had darted in front of their car on Meadowlands Drive. If not the same one, then a littermate.

Roderick chuffed and looked up at her, as perplexed as she.

"We want the wolf," the big man said. "You can go."

Darinda flexed her fingers, summoning power. "Can't do that."

The were lolled his tongue. She reached for his mind and hit psychic static. Warded against mental invasion. Somehow they'd learned Roderick had hired a witch and come prepared. How had they found her out so fast?

The were barked sharply, and his human pack moved in.

No time to run, or place to run to. Roderick planted himself at her side and snarled at first the pair, then the big man. Darinda held up her hands. "Stop," she ordered, "or I'll scream."

One of the tag team chuckled. "Go ahead, honey. See what it gets you."

If you insist. She hauled in air until she thought her lungs would burst. She shrieked.

The sonic blast hit both of the pair and knocked them back a full three yards. Lucky for her they'd stuck close together. They fell to the ground, writhing and clutching at their ears. Car alarms went off like sirens in a nearby parking area, and one unfortunate passing motorist had his car windows shattered.

And Peri'd called her nuts when she'd decided to take singing lessons from a banshee.

With the tag team out of commission, Darinda whirled and slammed hard air at the big man. He staggered, but didn't go down. Instead he pulled out a knife. Its blade caught the light with a wink that warned of silver and magic. He sliced downward. Darinda felt her air spell part like soft margarine. The muscle man lumbered toward her.

"Run!" she ordered Roderick. "He's got silver!"

Roderick barked to indicate he'd heard. Then he charged the man with the knife.

Stupid. Stupid, pig-headed male. How was she supposed to fire off a defensive spell with him in the way?

Roderick leaped, shifting in midair Instead of sinking his dagger up to the hilt in a wolf's neck, the big man found his fighting arm caught in the steely grip of another man's powerful hand. Roderick's fist found the knifewielder's chin. Knife-wielder dropped like a stone.

Okay, maybe not so stupid. Still a pig-headed male.

Something hit her in the back of the leg. She stumbled to one knee. Bright teeth flashed before her eyes, and rancid breath slapped her in the nose. She'd forgotten the were. His jaws darted at her throat but slid aside at the last second. That much of her "untouchable" spell still operated. He shut his jaws on her hair instead and yanked with all his strength. Sharp flashes of agony knifed in front of her eyes. Darinda cried out. No banshee shriek this time, only a wail of pure pain.

Roderick, once more wolf, leaped on top of them. The were let her go, his jaws needed to defend himself. The battle was fierce, decidedly onesided, and over in seconds. The were broke free and streaked across the grass. Roderick raced after him. The enemy were darted across Kelly Drive. Screeching brakes and yells from drivers put an end to the pursuit. Roderick turned and loped back to Darinda.

She sat up, rubbing her head. Roderick pawed her shoulder. The paw turned into a hand. "Are you hurt?"

"That depends. Is my scalp still attached to me?"

"Seems to be. No blood, at any rate."

"Then I'm not hurt." She scrambled up. "Come on, we have to get out of here."

"Not just yet. Not without answers."

The tag team was unconscious and therefore useless to them, so Roderick stalked over to the knife-wielder. He hooked his fingers into the man's jacket and hauled their dazed, would-be assassin upright. "Start talking, ape. Who sent you after me?"

"Huh ruh?"

Roderick shook him violently, like a dog with a doll. He thrust his face, and his bared teeth, right up against the man's blank expression. "Want to do this the messy way, eh?"

"Nobody's getting messy." Darinda shouldered her way up beside him and laid her palm flat on the big man's forehead. She shut her eyes. The man's eyes closed. Darinda's opened. "His name's Pete Koslavski. He's from Trenton. Local muscle, odd-job man. Somebody hired him and his buddies. He's thinking 'a stinkin' mutt.' He was supposed to kill 'some limey wolf' and rough up anyone with him."

Roderick growled. "I don't suppose he knows the mutt's name."

Darinda murmured a question. The man grunted. "Alfie. I think that was him you just chased off. Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing. Maybe he'll remember more if I rip off his—"

"No! No messy, no rippy. It sounds like that were was the brains. These men are just hired hands. I'll probably get more from the knife than we will from them." She bent and scooped their attacker's weapon off the ground and thrust it into her back pocket. "Now let's move. That were might have gone for his pack."

They had a more immediate problem as well in that they'd drawn an audience. The sounds of braking cars had increased, and the shouts and catcalls from their occupants had definitely changed in tone, particularly from the women. "What are you gawping at?" Roderick blasted at them.

"What do you think?" Darinda said. There had to be a spell somewhere that would keep a were clothed once he switched from canine to human. She kept her own eyes fixed firmly on the dark flow of the Schuylkill while she grabbed for his hand. "We need to get you out of sight."

"Point well taken." They raced off, to a chorus of boos and exhortations to get a room. Off in the distance, a siren added its piercing note to the urgency.

A London Werewolf in America

They didn't need to run far. Not too distant from *The Cowboy* the footpath curved around a solid rock wall that blocked them from sight of any motorists, as well as from the police car that whizzed by moments later. "You'd better change," Darinda said. "Unless one of those cops is Charlie, they're going to take a dim view of a naked guy out in public."

"That wasn't a wolf."

"Or a jackal. I know. I've never seen a were like that."

"Those monkeys knew what I was. They were after me specifically, just like the others."

"They knew I'm a witch. They had defensive charms."

"They couldn't have known I'd be down here unless—"

"They couldn't have known I'd be with you unless—"

In chorus: "They're watching the house."

"That dog I almost ran down," Darinda said. "It looked just like the were that jumped us. There could be more than one." She felt the blood drain from her face. "Aunt Letty."

She was talking to the rock. About a foot below her eye line Roderick barked and bolted up the path. Darinda raced after him. *Slow!* she shot at his mind. *We don't want to draw anybody's attention.*

He snarled, but he slowed to a brisk trot and urged her on with gruff, insistent huffs. They moved as quickly as they dared. Another police cruiser shot by with lights flashing. The turnoff to Meadowlands loomed, and both forgot caution and ran for it. The few people out on the Drive paid no mind to them. In the rush to follow the cops and find out what was going on, the agitated woman and her big hairy dog barely rated a glance.

* * * *

Aunt Letty was waiting for them at the door. Roderick leapt over the threshold and promptly shifted. "Are you all right?" he demanded of her.

"I was just about to ask you the same," Aunt Letty said coolly. She took Darinda's arm, guided her inside, and shut the door. "I've been hearing the most outrageous things. Dogs fighting down by the river, naked men—"

"Already?" Darinda said. "Charlie called already?"

"Oh, no. On the scanner, dear. I bought one when Charles joined the force. I know he's grown and all, but a mother still worries." She narrowed her eyes at Darinda. "Do I want to know about this?"

"I think you'd better. You haven't had any problems since we got back from the Duquesnes'?"

"I'll make sure we don't." Roderick stalked into the kitchen. Seconds later the door slammed.

Aunt Letty shook her head. "It hasn't even been a week. I'm going to run out of tea."

They sipped their tea at the kitchen table. While they waited for Roderick's return, Darinda recounted this most recent incident. She gave as detailed a description of the strange were as she could remember. "I'm not sure exactly what he was," she finished, "but I'm certain he wasn't a wolf."

"No, it doesn't sound like one of us. He might have been a coyote."

Darinda raised her brows. "A coyote? I didn't know they lived around here."

"Oh, they've been moving East for decades, dear. Wissahickon Gorge pretty much belongs to them these days. But we've never had any trouble with them. I can't imagine why one would want to attack you."

Or Roderick, Darinda thought. He hadn't been in the country long enough to make this many enemies. "Do you suppose—"

She broke off when the large doggie door in the kitchen entrance swung upward and Roderick came in. He immediately rose up and switched. "Were stink all over the yard, as well as across the street," he announced. "They've been hiding themselves among the dogs. No more feeding strays."

"Your aunt thinks it's a coyote," Darinda said.

"Coyote?" He lifted his brows just as she had. "Those little yappy, stinky things? I thought they lived out West, with the cowboys and the Gila monsters and such."

"Not these days," Aunt Letty said. "The world's a different place from those books you used to read. Some of them even own businesses, if you can imagine that."

"No, I can't. Do we have a coyote named Alfie angry with us for some reason?"

"Alfie? I don't recall anyone by that name, wolf or coyote. Perhaps it's one of Eugene's friends. He's not as discrete as he could be. Darinda, dear, is something the matter?"

Depended on your point of view, she thought. Roderick stood beside her chair with his hand on the back of it and his arm creating a possessive barrier around her. He was still were-naked, and his "rampant manhood," as Peri's paperback collection liked to term it, hung uncomfortably close to her face. "Hung" being the operative word. Keeping her eyes averted was becoming a definite chore.

Letty snorted shrewdly. She frowned at her nephew's face, then at the source of the problem. "Manners, Roddy. Miss Lowell is our guest."

It took a moment before he caught on. His upper lip rose. "Bloody monkey priggishness," he muttered and stomped into the parlor. When he returned, he had an afghan wrapped around his middle. "You need to call Charlie," he said to Aunt Letty. "Not in the morning. Right now. Get him in on the investigation. If coyotes are keeping us under surveillance he needs to know about it."

"So does Big Alex," Darinda added. "This could be some kind of territorial takeover. Charlie will want to pass the word along."

"Yes," Aunt Letty agreed. "I'll tell Charles right now. Coyotes. I never would have believed it. Well, he'll know how to handle it without involving humans. This must be kept within family."

She got up and went to the phone on the wall. Darinda also rose and quietly left the kitchen to grant her privacy. Roderick followed almost on her heels. Darinda took a seat on the sofa. She felt shakier than she cared to admit. Fending off attacking humans, that she could do in her sleep. Weres were nightsiders like herself, and this one had been shielded to boot. She couldn't forget how close the were's teeth had come to her throat.

Roderick took up position beside the sofa, just as he had in the kitchen. "Your scent's spiking again."

"Reaction. I'll be fine."

Aunt Letty's voice reached them from the kitchen, browbeating some unfortunate desk sergeant. Yes, he jolly well *could* contact Officer Meadows. His mother had a family emergency. What part of that could he not comprehend?

"Thanks for the save."

"Nonsense. You're pack now. Packmates defend each other."

"I'm supposed to be protecting you."

"And you did admirably against the humans. The least I could do was reciprocate."

"So, other than just now, what have you done to tick off the local coyote population?

"Haven't the foggiest. I've never even met one, though I've heard of them. Mother's had dealing with them in some our overseas ventures." He snorted. "Ill-bred rubbish."

"With money and connections, if they could afford this." She cocked her hip upwards and patted the bulge of the knife in her pocket. "Whatever witch spelled this is going to tell me who paid for it."

"Wouldn't that be a violation of customer confidentiality? Betrayal of some kind of oath? You folk are keen on oaths, so you keep telling me."

"This violates our general oath to do no harm. As in threatening your life and mine. That witch will talk, trust me on that."

He surprised her with a smile full of deadly teeth. "If I didn't know you better, I'd swear you were a wolf."

"You do know better, you don't know me, so leave it alone."

He chuckled. He was standing entirely too close to her again, with only the afghan between her and his unashamed maleness. Drat were lack of modesty anyway. "This clears up one mystery," she said. "If they're local, and they've been keeping an eye on the house, that must be how they knew about me. I had no idea I was that well-known in the were community."

"Or someone forewarned them." His brief good humor disappeared. "Why watch the house to begin with, unless they were waiting for me?"

"Maybe it's all a mistake. Maybe it's Charlie they're after. He's a cop, and he reports to Big Alex."

"You don't believe that any more than I do. I'm the one they want dead, and both of us know it." His lips twisted in an ugly snarl. "It's definitely family."

"It's beginning to look that way. I'm sorry."

He shrugged. The afghan shifted dangerously. Darinda glanced away, not quite in time. "Don't be. This is all quite normal for us. We need to determine who so I can take the fight to them, and not stand around like a—"

"That's that." Aunt Letty bustled in from the kitchen. Darinda quickly shifted her position to hide the knife. No need to Letty know exactly how close a call they'd had. "I finally got past that awful human and got through to Charles. He's already looking into it. He doesn't get off duty until morning. He'll call me then."

"Have him meet us at my place on South Street at ten tomorrow morning. We can trade info, and I need to check up on a couple of things. I get the feeling Big Alex will take it from there. With any luck we should have this cleared up in another day or two."

Then she could get away from Roderick and his disturbing, powerful pull. If only he didn't get naked so often, and so easily and unselfconsciously. If only she weren't so acutely aware of him as a male and not a werewolf.

He's getting married, she reminded herself. He's made an oath to someone else.

His nostrils flared briefly. "You're spiking again," he murmured.

"I'm tired," She said, and hoped she looked the part. "Attacks by Jersey muscle do that to me. We all need a good night's sleep after this. Tomorrow we strike back."

Chapter 8

Darinda maneuvered her Toyota briskly, if not always safely, through the regular Market Street traffic. Roderick sat beside her, with her enormous shoulder bag wedged in between them. He was dressed in jeans, a crisp plaid shirt, and a pair of leather boots, all with traces of Charlie's scent clinging to them. Darinda kept stealing glances at him, part of the reason for her less-than-stellar driving. All he needed was a bandanna and a Stetson, and maybe a little stubble. Darinda hid her smile. Except for the moustachioed Charlie, weres rarely went in for facial hair, being hairy enough in their other form. "Gone native already, I see."

"These are Charlie's clothes. I've already wrecked enough of my own. Had I known what was waiting for me, I'd have shipped over my wardrobe. They probably would have lost that, too."

She snuck another glance his way. He glared out the windshield with narrow-eyed intensity and kept a white-knuckled grip on the door handle. "You slept outside my room last night," she said.

"I most certainly did not."

"C'mon. I heard your nails scrabbling on the floor when I got up this morning. And the floor right by the door was warm, like a big furry rug had been lying there." A cab cut her off, and she blasted her horn. Roderick's death grip on the handle tightened. "Your room is safer than the hall. I warded it for a reason. Why aren't you wearing the amulet I gave you?"

"I gave it to Aunt Letty. She needs it more than I do." His voice was one step up from a growl. "You were frightened last night. Upset. You tried to hide it, but I can tell." His teeth flashed briefly. It wasn't a smile. "I didn't say anything because I knew you'd react this way."

"I'm guarding you, not the other way around. If I want to take precautions, you're supposed to follow them." "You're pack," he barked "For the duration, at least. Pack looks out for each other. It's what we're famous for."

His bitter tone alarmed her. She shot another glance at him. He'd turned his face away from her to glare at the stream of humanity clogging the sidewalks. Or perhaps to hide his expression.

She didn't think. She sensed a swell of pain and reached for him automatically. Her hand touched his shoulder. Truth surged into her like a tidal wave.

He trusted her. Her. The human. The American. The woman. The witch. This proud wolf had put his life into her hands because he had no choice. He was isolated in a strange country overrun with apes, and somebody wanted to kill him. His own family, in all likelihood. His pack. Without a pack, a wolf had nothing, was nothing. All he had was her. And he had chosen trust. She wasn't certain how to feel about that.

"Roderick," she started, "I—"

He yelped in alarm. Darinda looked out the windshield, just in time to hit the brakes and avert what would have been a nasty rear-ender with a Dodge. She yanked her hand off his shoulder and clamped it back on the wheel.

Roderick glared at her. She could swear his ears had flattened against his skull. "Do please watch the road."

Sage advice. She swallowed hard and concentrated on getting them to South Street in one piece.

* * * *

The knife told them little. "It's had a slicer put on it," Peri announced after ten minutes' careful examination. "Offense spell," she explained to Roderick. "Cuts through magical defenses. That's how he got through the air spell. I don't recognize any signature. You?"

Darinda shook her head. Stormin' Norman snuggled in her arms, flicking his tongue contentedly. "Fraid not. I'll be honest, I was hoping for dark arts. That way we could have narrowed the search."

"Dark arts?" Roderick stood behind the counter, as far from the window and Springsteen as Set A Spell's confines would allow. He and the cat threw occasional snarls at each other across the room. "You mean, like an evil wizard or something?"

"Along those lines, yes. Death spells are dark-arts related, and most of the dark practitioners hang out in Germantown. They leave specific signatures on their work, too, like a scent. Unfortunately, an offense spell's pretty generic. All it does is disrupt other magic. Any murder or mayhem that results is only a side effect. Any witch, light or dark, could have spelled this dagger. It's not going to lead us anywhere."

"Well, we know one thing." Peri drew a few harmless runes in the air with the tip of the blade. Their trails sparkled briefly before they winked out. "Whoever commissioned this has money. Silver daggers don't just grow on trees."

"I never understood the whole silver thing," Roderick said. "We're not like the bats. Knives and bullets kill us regardless of the metal involved."

"But you're tougher to kill than a human," Peri pointed out. "Silver holds magic like nobody's business. Better than iron or steel. You want to kill a werewolf and make sure he's dead, you use silver and bless it or spell it. Sort'a like added insurance. No offense or anything, but it looks like somebody with a heavy wallet really really really wants you dead."

"Thank you, I'd already reached that conclusion. What's wrong with the bloody cat now?"

Springsteen had leaped to his feet. His tail bottled and he hissed out the window. Abruptly he dove off the sill and streaked for the back. Seconds later Charlie entered the shop. He sniffed the air suspiciously. "Is there a cat in here?"

"Not any more," Peri said. "Two of you guys are too much for him."

Charlie went on sniffing. "Are those my clothes?" he asked Roderick.

"I've a yen for plaid today. Your mum's filled you in?"

"Just the basics. So, you've got coyotes after you? And you've been in Philadelphia how long?"

"It could be gang related," Darinda said. "Wolf pack versus coyote pack. We're inclined to think it's personal."

"Neat trick," Charlie said, "considering the local coyotes wouldn't know Rod from Rin Tin Tin."

"One of them knows me now," Roderick said darkly. "A scroungy little mongrel named Alfie. Ring any bells?"

"Not off the bat. Better give me your statements. Don't leave anything out."

Darinda and Roderick did so, in detail, correcting and enhancing each other's testimony. Peri moved to stand as close to the good-looking Charlie as a wolf's sense of personal space would allow. Springsteen's sourtempered yowls from the back condemned them all.

"How about the humans?" Darinda asked when they'd finished. "Did you get anything out of them?"

"Are you kidding? No one saw anything, no one knew anything. Without anyone to press charges, we had to let them go. You probably got more than we did." He half-grinned at Roderick. "Had plenty of witnesses to the 'naked hunk,' though. Not one of them could describe your face."

"So I'm off the hook for that?" Roderick said dryly. "I suppose that's something."

"Not much." Charlie looked to Darinda. "You're sure the humans were taking orders from the were?"

"It looked that way to me."

"And you think they're watching the house."

"They've found me twice," Roderick said. "Not to mention Darinda nearly ran one down in the street. Surveillance does suggest itself."

"Mom's alone up there. Except for you two now." Charlie growled, his good humor vanishing. "I don't know all Eugene's friends. Maybe he knows coyotes. He's an open-minded guy. I can't picture Lucy or Emma dating one. If anyone's ever mentioned this Alfie to me, I don't remember it. I'll run him through the system, see if he's got a record. This, too." He took an evidence bag from his pocket and deposited the knife into it, careful to touch only the handle and not the silver blade. "Maybe I can find out who crafted it, but don't hold your breath."

"So what's the big deal with coyotes?" Peri said. "They're still wolves, right? Just smaller."

"They're skulky, smelly, backstabbing little curs, according to all Mother's reports," Roderick said. "Thank Lycaon we don't have any in England."

"They're also smart, adaptable, don't mind cities and play well with humans," Charlie added. "Better than we do, sad to say. Coyotes have been known to hire humans to do their dirty work. But magic? That's new. That's scary."

Darinda absently stroked Norman's head spines. "You don't think this is a turf war?"

"That's the easy answer. I'd have bought into it if they hadn't gone after Rod. He has no ties to Philadelphia. I don't like the implications."

"Yeah," Peri said. "Three thousand werewolves in Center City alone and they go after the new guy. Way to wreck tourism."

"You think this has anything to do with the wedding?" Charlie asked Roderick.

Roderick's expression was neutral. "Darinda says no. The Duquesnes have no objection to the match."

"Bite it. I guess that would've been too simple. Well, I'll do some nosing around. I can keep this clean of human police, but if a coyote war's brewing, Big Alex has to be told." He started for the door.

Darinda got in his way. Charlie hadn't been stricken from the list of suspects yet, and he was about to walk out with the dagger, their only physical clue. She used returning Norman to his tank as cover. "Before you go," she said, "Roderick wants to try dinner with you and your siblings again. Can you make it tonight?" She rested her hand on his forearm.

Charlie seemed surprised by the contact, but didn't flinch or snap. As she'd hoped, he was more human-tolerant than most weres. "I think that's a great idea. In fact, I'll set it up. Someplace classy. No more fang bars." Darinda removed her hand before he could shake it off. He nodded to them all and left.

Peri sighed. "Tell me he's single."

Springsteen yowled at such blasphemy. "All *right*, Springsteen, I'm *com*ing. Yeesh, what a pain in the butt. 'Scuze me, you two. Gotta smooth fur." Peri stomped into the back. A barrage of hisses ensued.

"Charlie's clean," Darinda said. "He's a good, honest cop, determined to keep the city and were reputations clean. He's concerned for your safety and especially worried about his mom. If he wants anybody dead, it's whoever's threatening his family."

"One down." His mouth stretched in a thin, nasty grin. "You know, I almost hope it's Eugene. He's just enough of a git to actually think he can pull this off."

"If this wasn't so serious, I'd think you were enjoying it. The detective stuff, I mean."

"All wolves enjoy a good hunt. Bringing down the prey and sinking our fangs into captured flesh. It's what we live for."

That explained the nasty. "And when we catch our, um, prey?"

"I'll deal with it. Whether it's family or not. Especially if it's family." His eyes made it clear exactly how. "There's no need for you to involve yourself in that aspect of it."

"Thanks. I guess you know how witches feel about doing deliberate harm."

"And you know how we feel when our lives and packs are threatened." He wasn't grinning any more. "I'm asking you to lead me to my kill. Can you live what that?"

Wolf, she thought. They might look like big, shaggy dogs, but they weren't. They might look like a handsome, sexy man, but they weren't. If she didn't remember that every second, she was liable to get her throat ripped out. "If I don't, you may die, and I've sworn to protect you." She couldn't quite meet his eyes. "I'll help you eliminate suspects. Let's see where that takes us."

"Fair enough." He drew in a long breath and let it slide out. It ended on a violent sneeze. "If we're done here, do you mind if we leave? I've got quite enough cat up my nostrils."

Peri stuck her head in from the back. "I heard that!"

"I was talking to the cat."

Darinda leaned over Norman's tank to give her dragon a final pat. "I'll try to get back in a day or so. Looks like I'm having dinner with a pack of wolves tonight."

"Group date." Peri stuck out her pouty lower lip. "You get everything."

* * * *

Darinda suggested both of them stick close to Meadowlands for the afternoon. No sense in courting further trouble. Roderick didn't care for that. He wanted to try to pick up the trail of the werecoyote and "hunt the bugger down."

"If you go, I'll have to go with you," Darinda said, "and where does that leave Aunt Letty? I can't be in two places at once. Anyway, a coyote risking a war with wolves will know how to cover his trail. I don't think you're going to find him."

Roderick grumbled but acquiesced. While he called Philadelphia Airport and verbally ripped them to shreds over his still-missing luggage, Darinda decided to run a background check. "Aunt Letty, I'm having trouble keeping everyone straight. Do you have a family album or something?"

Aunt Letty had several, as it turned out, and was as thrilled to share them as any mother would be. She brewed tea for Darinda and beef broth for herself, and the two women settled on the sofa with a thick photo album spread across their laps and three more albums stacked on the coffee table. Roderick stuck his head in briefly, wrinkled his nose, and withdrew. Shortly afterwards Darinda heard the clack of the doggy door.

Darinda started to get up. "He shouldn't be out there alone. I know he'll try to track the coyotes."

"There's nothing to track. I've already checked. They smothered their scent in musk. Let him alone, dear. He won't go beyond the yard. He's frightfully frustrated just now, poor puppy. Crowd him and he's liable to snap at you. Now, where would you like to begin?"

They began at the start of the album. Keeping the players straight, Darinda quickly realized, was going to be a chore and a half. Weres leaned toward huge extended families. The Meadows clan was an offshoot of the Chase, which had lines centuries long stretching back through European history. The Duquesnes were distant relatives, and the three packs mingled on a regular basis. One photo showed over fifty individuals gathered on the sprawling lawn of some massive country estate. And that was just the human-looking faces. No telling how many of those big canine beasts roving in and out of frame were family members.

"Have you got any pictures a bit more, well, intimate?" Darinda asked. "More like immediate family."

"Certainly, dear." Aunt Letty flipped pages, chuckling. "Come from a small pack, do you?"

"I'm afraid so. It's just me and my brother, and he's in Chicago. Witches aren't social by nature." The older woman tsked. "That's just terrible. How do you survive without family around?"

"I've got Peri, and a lot of good friends." Well...customers and acquaintances. It hadn't really hit until just now how non-social she'd been. When was the last time she'd gone on a date? No wonder she'd reacted so strongly to Roderick. "Look at it this way. There's no line for the bathroom in the morning."

"For us either. It's why we like big yards. I miss having puppies around, but I don't miss the housebreaking. Here we go."

This was a photo Darinda could deal with: a much-younger Letty, a smiling, long-faced man, and five children. The eldest, a gawky boy with Charlie's features, held up a mangled squirrel and grinned from ear to ear. "Charles's first kill," Aunt Letty said proudly. "He didn't even eat it. He slept with it for a week, until it got too pungent. Pups. They grow so fast."

"Uh...yeah. Okay, that's Charlie, so this must be Eugene. The little one's Emma. I'm sorry, I can't remember the other two."

"This is Lucy." Aunt Letty pointed to the dark-haired, rather cool-eyed girl standing close to her father. "The other one's Lorraine. She lives with her mate's pack in New Jersey. No litters yet. I'm going to have to nip that girl. All this reminiscing makes me want to hold a puppy in my lap again."

She turned the page to another large group shot. Roderick's face leaped out at Darinda's eyes. He was about ten years younger here—early twenties, surly, scowling. Her gaze shifted from him almost at once to the two shewolves he stood with. The girl was in his age range, sleek and deadlylooking as a cobra. That was no smile on her face. The fortyish woman wore a similar shark's leer. Cold yellow eyes peered out on a world full of prey she considered all hers for the taking. Darinda repressed her shudder just in time. Alpha males, she was coming to believe, couldn't hold a fang to the alpha females.

She tapped the air over the image. No way would she touch it directly. "Is that Roderick's mother?"

Letty's sniff spoke volumes. "Bernadette Chase," she confirmed. "My younger sister. She's a bit of a..."

"Bitch?"

"That's not an insult to us, dear. Let's call her headstrong. Necessary when you're in charge of a pack as large as the Chases." She leaned close to Darinda's ear for a conspiratorial murmur. "Regardless of what you might hear elsewhere, she didn't kill her mate. That's him right here." She indicated the hefty gray wolf lying at Bernadette's feet. "Leopold Chase. Hit by a bus, poor dear. He was so much older than my sister, and went a bit dotty. Started chasing cars."

"Who's this one here?"

"That's Tamra, Roddy's older sister. Just like her mother, more's the pity. The Chases have always been competitive, some more so than others. Perhaps it's for the best Roddy's out of it here in America."

Yeah, Darinda thought, that was one way to look at it. As she stared at the photo, her imagination saw it move, saw young Roderick and Tamra try to jostle each other aside even as the camera snapped. Jockeying for position, for rank, in a family photo. Bernadette would have moved first, placed herself at the forefront with her mate safely submissive at her feet. Every other wolf in the picture, she noted, was lined up behind Bernadette.

One other thing she noted: both Roderick and Tamra had their mother's eyes.

"That's quite a spread," she remarked. "Where was this taken?"

"That's Chase Manor, dear. North of London. The Chases are a wealthy pack and have been for decades. They started with real estate, but lately Detty's branched them into other areas. If there's one thing a wolf knows how to manage, it's territory."

Territory and a lot of money could count as two good reasons for murder among any number of species. Darinda nodded and bid Aunt Letty continue.

The litany was brief. Roderick's next-youngest sibling, a brother named Darryl, had succumbed to ringworm in his teens. The slim gray wolf rolling in the grass with three puppies was Roderick's younger sister, Diane. At the end of the queue came Orrin, a pinched-faced twelve-year-old in a rumpled suit. Darinda recognized his hunched posture and miserable expression. She'd seen it the previous night on Cole Duquesne. Orrin Chase, the family omega. He'd hidden himself behind some cousins and didn't look directly at the camera.

A bit more scrutiny turned up the Meadows clan, or at least Letty's mate and Charlie. The rest of the pups were in wolf form. Letty pointed out a number of European Duquesnes. "We haven't seen so much of them lately," Letty said. "Ellis's family, I mean. I'm glad they want this marriage. It will tie the packs together. Give us strength."

"I don't see you in this."

"Why, I'm right in front of you. Right here." Aunt Letty pointed to a silver she-wolf lolling in the grass near the Meadows pups. "I had to stay wolf a lot in those days. Eugene and Lorraine were always running off, the scamps."

"You're very lovely as a wolf."

"Thank you, dear. I don't change so much any more. Older bodies don't take the shift very well. And we..."

Her hands started to tremble. Darinda caught the album before it could slip off her lap and returned it, open, to the coffee table. When her tentative touch wasn't met with a snarl she put her arm around Letty's shoulders. "Hey, it's okay. You're lovely in this form, too, and you've got a lovely family."

"It isn't all right. Not always. Not for us. I was very lucky. When my George passed on, Charles just naturally took over. There was no fight for succession. He looks after me. He let me stay here in my home and never challenged me. But then, Charles always was an odd sort. A police officer. Can you imagine?" She snorted out a little laugh. "Very few wolves reach my years. Alphas, never. I'm so afraid, dear. Afraid for Roddy. He's such an innocent pup."

Not so innocent, Darinda thought. Not with a mother like that. He'd survived this long in a wolf pack, he knew what the score was.

So did Bernadette. Ship the threat off to America, tie him to another pack in another country. Maybe that was good enough for her. Was it good enough for Tamra? Maybe getting her brother out of sight, out of mind was only the beginning.

So how did the coyotes fit in?

"We'll figure this out," she assured Letty. "We've got a couple of leads. You'll be bouncing Roderick's puppies on your lap in no time."

"That would be nice." Aunt Letty wiped her eyes. "Even if they are half French."

Roderick picked that moment to stick his snout in. Spotting his aunt in emotional distress, he bounded to her side. He laid his huge paw on her thigh and licked her cheek. The look he speared at Darinda bordered on a threat.

"Don't growl at her, Roddy. She hasn't done a thing beyond listen to an old bitch ramble on." Aunt Letty patted Roderick's head. "She's a good girl, and you're a good boy."

Roderick shifted abruptly. Thank Hecate he was kneeling. "Don't call me that, for Lycaon's sake."

"This old bitch will call you whatever she wants to. What would you like for lunch?"

"Something I can rip apart. I'm in a ripping mood."

"I'll see what I can scrounge up."

The phone in the kitchen rang. Roderick stood. Darinda hurriedly looked away. "I'll get it."

"You will not." Aunt Letty got up and brushed past him, abandoning Darinda to the sofa and Roderick. They heard her pick up the phone and speak Charlie's name, then her voice dropped below overhearing level.

Darinda sat with her hand shielding both her eyes and her reddened cheeks. "I wish you'd stop doing that."

"I wish you weren't so prudish." The creep, he knew exactly what she meant. "If it bothers you so much, don't look at it."

"I'm not looking."

He snickered. He remained planted in her personal space and showed no inclination to move. "No, of course you're not. Want to know what your odor says?"

"Get bent."

"You know, we could just pop upstairs and settle all this right now, if you're game."

"Not while you're engaged to someone else, I can't."

"And if I weren't?"

"Not then, either."

"No wonder you're so jittery. All that pent-up energy."

"See that wall over there? Would you like me to throw you into it?"

"Are all witches lacking in humor, or did I just get lucky?" He put his hand on her upper back and tipped her forward. Before she could protest this manhandling he pulled the afghan out from behind her and let her go. He took his sweet time knotting it around his middle. She wanted to scream. "There. Your delicate sensibilities are safe."

Never again, Darinda decided then and there. Never again would she work for a werewolf. "You're an arrogant bastard."

"Granted."

"And you have grass in your hair."

"I was rolling on the lawn. No fresh scent or scat in the yard. Our watchers may have abandoned us, now that they know we're on to them."

"They're liable to try something else."

"Which is why I need you at my side. I'd hoped you could accustom yourself to life among weres. We can't shift in our clothes. It gets pricy."

"You don't have to keep waving your—your cultural differences in my face, either. I know you're doing it deliberately."

"Stop showing such an interest and I won't."

"I told you, I'm not interested."

"Your scent's immensely interested."

"Screw my scent." She shot to her feet and glared into his eyes. "I'm not some bunny you can chase after. I'm a witch. We bite back."

He bared his teeth. "I'm counting on it."

"That's it." He was going right into the wall, client or no client. Before she could summon her air spell they both heard the click of Aunt Letty hanging up the phone. Roderick smoothly glided to one side. When Letty returned to the parlor he had put three feet between them and appeared the model of propriety.

As long as one didn't look at the afghan. Darinda was dead certain that wasn't a fold.

"That was Charles, Roddy," Aunt Letty announced. "He's set up a little party for you and your cousins. A decent place, near City Hall. I hope there's no trouble this time."

"There won't be," Roderick said "Darinda's coming with me." He beamed at her. Darinda forced a smile.

"Oh, that's a relief. I'm so sorry about the other night. I don't want you to get the wrong idea about Philadelphia."

"It's an interesting city," he agreed mildly, still beaming at Darinda. "I'm getting all sorts of ideas." "I hope some of them include your mate-to-be," Aunt Letty said primly. Roderick promptly deflated. Darinda caught Letty's eye. The old she-wolf winked. "Now go get dressed while I fix you two some lunch. Your dinner's not until seven-thirty and I know you won't last that long. And please do comb the grass out of your hair before you come to the table." She swept into her kitchen like a queen.

Roderick didn't even try to smother his growl. "I hate it when the shes gang up," he complained.

"Yeah," Darinda said with a chuckle and no sympathy. "Life's a definite bitch."

Chapter 9

Darinda took special care with her preparations for the evening. She used the strong soap she'd picked up at Set A Spell this morning and a careful application of perfume. She wanted the wolves unable to read her without coming across as insulting. Because this was a casual dinner, she opted for slacks and a sweater, both just a bit on the baggy side. She didn't want Roderick getting any more of his "ideas."

Honestly, what was he thinking? That he could fit in one last quickie before his upcoming wedding? With her? "It won't work," she confidently told her reflection as she brushed and arranged her hair. "He's a wolf and I'm a witch. Witches don't need men to make them feel like they're somebody. We walk alone and we like it."

She frowned. Was that just a hint of doubt in her reflected eyes? No, she decided, couldn't be. Roderick did more than flirt with her. He flirted with being an oath-breaker, and she wouldn't be a party to that. "I can't," she muttered. "It goes against everything witches believe in. I can't."

She flung the brush down on the dresser and turned away from the mirror just as a firm knock sounded on her door and Roderick's voice sounded from the hall. "Charlie will be here directly. Are you decent?"

"Are you?"

The door swung open. Roderick stepped in like he owned the place. Even in borrowed slacks, shirt and sport coat he looked good enough to make a woman's mouth water. Darinda's heart did a back flip she couldn't prevent. "I'm dressed," he said. "Best I can do." He shut the door. "Can you get what we need?"

"Maybe." She found it easier to watch him in the mirror than to look at him directly. "If any one of them is thinking, 'I want that sucker dead,' then yes, we're good. Otherwise it could be tricky."

"You had no trouble with the Duquesnes."

A London Werewolf in America

"That was an aura scan. That only gives me surface impressions. For anything deeper or more detailed, I need to touch the subject. The Duquesnes were pretty open in their feelings, but one of them still could be hiding something. Albert's the only one I'm absolutely certain about."

"How long to do you need to touch them?"

"That depends on how much info you want. The longer the touch, the more I get. These are weres and we don't know each other. Any longer than a couple of seconds and they're going to get bitey."

"Will that be enough?"

She bit off a sigh. There was just no arguing with a wolf with his paws dug in. "I'll try a scan first, then go for a touch. We don't want them to know the real reason I'm with you, and I don't want to lose any fingers. I'll do the best I can, but don't get your hopes up."

In the second it took her to turn around he crossed the room. His hands closed on her shoulders. She shuddered at the sheer power of him and the blast of utter faith in her that came with it. "This is my family," he all but hissed. "I need to know beyond all doubt. Do what you have to. You won't come to harm. I won't allow it."

He released her, and she swayed. The bed and the dresser invited her to sit or lean, respectively, and gather her shaken senses. She summoned her will and stayed on her feet. Witches might walk alone, but no one ever said it was easy.

Concerned, Roderick reached for her again. She shied away. "Don't," she said in a breathy voice not at all like her. "Didn't I just tell you what touching others does to me?"

It was a lame excuse, but he bought it. He reluctantly withdrew his hand. "Sex must be hell for your kind," he said bluntly. "How do you make little witches?"

"We manage." There, she had herself under control again, or just about. Good enough to fling a warning shot. "Afterwards we bite the male's head off. Like spiders."

"No you don't." But he looked doubtful. Darinda only grinned.

"Roddy!" Aunt Letty called from downstairs. "Charles is here."

"Thank Lycaon," Roderick muttered. He started to offer Darinda his arm, obviously thought better of it, and simply left the room, expecting her to follow. Darinda hefted her shoulder bag and trailed him down the stairs.

A London Werewolf in America

Charlie drove a white Crown Victoria, which Darinda strongly suspected was a former police cruiser. He didn't seem at all surprised to see her with Roderick on what should be a family outing. Perhaps he'd deduced why Roderick had really hired her. If so, he said and radiated nothing untoward. He greeted her politely and opened the rear door for her. She thanked him and got in. Roderick eschewed the front passenger seat and climbed in beside Darinda, which earned him raised eyebrows from Charlie. Again, he said nothing. He went to the house briefly to speak with his mother and give her a lick on the cheek before he got in behind the wheel.

"Police escort," Roderick said as they maneuvered down the drive. "Should I feel honored or insulted?"

"I'd be on guard if I were you. I talked to Big Alex's betas. Nobody knows zip about any coyote uprising. As far as Alfie goes, he's never turned up on anyone's radar, either Big Alex's or the department's. Not even a citation for jaywalking."

"Has your family had trouble with coyotes before?" Darinda asked.

"Never. I've never even arrested one. They're too slick, too good at keeping their heads down. Why they're after you, Rod, I have no idea. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Perhaps they fear another British invasion. Where are we going?"

He took the change of subject easily enough. "The Rib Shack. It's wererun. Not many humans, no vampires. Eugene kicked up a fuss, but bite him. You should be safe enough."

More meat. Darinda sank back on the seat. At this rate she'd waste away to a stick before they found Roderick's enemy.

Charlie's littermates met them on the sidewalk just outside the restaurant. The whole bunch exchanged greetings, lots of rough slaps and hugs. Darinda was accorded cool nods from the girls and a big-toothed leer from Eugene. Then they went inside, in order. Charlie entered first, with Roderick at his side, followed by Eugene, Lucy and Emma. Darinda, the outsider, was left to bring up the rear.

Just inside the door, however, Roderick captured her arm. "Hang rank," he murmured. "You're with me." None of the others said anything. Properly submissive, at least on the outside, Darinda played along.

Eugene briefly showed teeth at the table when Roderick insisted Darinda be seated beside him. A snarl from him and a *whurff* from Charlie silenced all argument. The pack seated themselves, again in rank order, with Charlie and Roderick first and the others circled around them. Darinda found herself beside the youngest, low-ranked Emma. Or maybe it wasn't just about rank; the teen had heaped a strong cologne on top of a strong deodorant. A slap in the nose to her family? Who was she trying to insult, Darinda wondered. Or what was it she wanted to hide?

A waiter brought menus. Praise Hecate, they served a selection of salads. Darinda ordered a garden salad and water, and earned more cold, arch looks and wrinkled noses. *Go ahead and sneer*, she thought. *If one of you is a killer, I'm going to bring you down*.

The wolves chatted among themselves, tacitly ignoring Darinda, which left her free to observe, and scan. For an alpha Charlie was remarkably easygoing, not at all threatened by Roderick's presence. But then, Roderick showed no interest in his territory or pack, so Charlie could afford to be affable. She'd already dropped him as a suspect, and so concentrated on the others.

Lucy gave off a warm, rosy glow, at odds with her cool exterior. She'd nabbed the seat beside Charlie, putting her one up on Eugene. Eugene's aura stuttered an annoying yellow-orange. An excitable boy, or a nervous one. Chafing at the leash, perhaps? Maybe cousin Roderick represented one alpha more than Eugene could tolerate. She'd have to contrive some excuse to touch him.

She might have to touch Emma, too. The youngest Meadows's aura pulsed yellow with fear, and her movements were edgy and quick. Could she be hiding something? A plot against the pack, perhaps? Hard to believe from a sixteen-year-old girl.

No, a sixteen-year-old she-wolf, Darinda corrected herself. It probably wasn't any fun for her living at the bottom of the heap, any more than it must be for Orrin Chase and Cole Duquesne. Predatory ambitions and adolescent hormones made for a volatile combination as well as a potentially deadly one.

Darinda reached toward her with a friendly smile, but the girl shied back, her lip rising. Darinda withdrew. So much for that. Try again later, with more subtlety.

The food arrived, plates heaped high with steaming cuts of meat. "Grazing, are we?" Eugene said, with a sneer for Darinda's salad. "I thought only cows—" Roderick snarled, and Eugene snapped his jaw shut. Suddenly Eugene found his meal fascinating, as did all the Meadows clan save alpha Charlie. Charlie winked at her, wished her an amiable *bon apatite*, and dug in.

The thought hit her then, like a thunderbolt. For all their smiles and jokes and laughs, the Meadows family accepted her, let her sit at the table and eat with them only because Roderick said so. Even Charlie. She was his pack. His property. Her magic and her thoughts were incidental. If he removed his protection, she'd be dead within seconds.

As a witch Darinda was accustomed to looking out for herself. To go so abruptly from self-reliant to utterly powerless, totally dependent on a wolf's good graces, didn't sit well with her at all.

Her scent must have shifted, because the whole pack stared at her. Emma edged her chair away. Roderick, however, inched closer until their legs touched. Marking his turf. "Is anything wrong with the food?" he said.

"The food's fine," she said, her thigh rigid against his. She'd drawn the pack's attention, never a good thing with predators. Distract them. She added heartily, "Let's eat."

That worked. The Meadowses dug in and forgot her again. Not Roderick. He watched her more than his plate. *I'm okay*, she beamed at him. *Nothing yet. Let them fill up, relax a little. Put them off their guard.*

He nodded fractionally. Good plan.

Plans are only good if they work, Darinda thought. She let the meal proceed to dessert before she set hers in motion. She opted to start with Charlie, the most human-tolerant. "If you don't mind my asking, why'd you become a cop? Is that a, well, a normal career choice for weres?"

"Hey, you know us. We love to hunt." Charlie smiled, showing off strong white teeth. "Chasing deer in the park didn't cut it for me. Chasing criminals does, as long as you've got a badge to back it up."

"Do you fellow officers know?"

"My captain knows, and some of the others." He shrugged. "They know there are parts of the city where a human's not welcome and I can move freely. The department's smart enough to want to stay on Big Alex's good side. I had a couple brushes with some jerks on the force when I started, but what rookie hasn't?"

Darinda nodded. "Don't ask, don't tell?"

He laughed at that. "Pretty much."

"So what about you?" Eugene leaned forward. "Why'd you become a witch? Looking for a thrill, or what?"

"You don't 'become' a witch," she explained patiently. "You're born one. Like weres."

"Yeah? I always thought—"

"No, you've never thought," Roderick cut in. "That's your problem."

Eugene bristled, and the auras at the table darkened to red. Eugene glared at Roderick. Roderick glared back. Eugene flinched and glanced away. The rest of the pack relaxed again. "Guess it could be worse," he muttered. "You could be a vampire. Nothing's worse than being a bat. Other than a monkey, that is."

Darinda leaned toward him, as he had with her. "Not even a coyote?" she said.

"Coyotes?" Eugene snorted. "Stinky little prairie dogs. I'd rather date a human. At least the monkeys know what hygiene is. Hey, Rod, I heard one of 'em jumped you. What was that about?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Roderick said easily. "I gave him some scars to show off to his friends. I doubt they'll be so bold again."

"They better not be. Bad enough they're spreading all over the park. I hope Mom's okay where she is."

"You could make sure of that," Charlie said pointedly. "Try stopping by more often than once a month."

Eugene jabbed his fork at the remains of his steak. He didn't look Charlie in the eye. Eugene, Darinda concluded, was not very bright.

And speaking of bright...the conversation turned elsewhere, but Darinda hadn't missed how Emma's aura had flared up in a panic during the previous debate. It continued to shiver nervously, although her face betrayed nothing. The tense fingers gripping her fork, however, told a different story.

So, dating a human was bad, but dating a coyote was worse. Not to mention all those harsh, conflicting smells she'd ladled on. An attempt to hide another, musky scent?

Abruptly Emma set down her fork. "May I be excused?" she asked Charlie.

He nodded, and she rose and headed for the restrooms. A second later, so did Lucy. So did Darinda. This might be her chance. An inadvertent bump as they exited stalls could tell her volumes. She wanted Emma especially. Something had set the teen on edge. Running with the wrong breed, perhaps.

"I didn't know monkeys pissed in packs too," she heard Eugene comment behind her. Then a yelp. Someone had cuffed him, either Roderick or Charlie. Well, the jerk had it coming. She followed the she-wolves into the restroom.

Emma ducked into a stall before Darinda could catch her. Okay, go for Lucy then. She pretended to stumble. Lucy was too quick. She swerved away from contact and slammed the stall door in Darinda's face without even bothering to growl. So much for that plan.

Lucy finished first. Darinda heard her at the sink, then the clack of her heels on the tiles as she took up position near Emma's stall. "Are you going to be in there all night?"

"If I have to," Emma shot back. The nerves in her voice sounded clearly in Darinda's ears. No telling what her sister heard. "Go back to the table. I'll be out when I'm done." Lucy huffed, mumbled something harsh-sounding in were, and stomped out of the restroom.

Emma didn't emerge until Darinda had finished washing her hands. The girl crept shyly up to the sink beside her. She watched Darinda in the mirror but averted her eyes from live contact. When Darinda turned toward her, the wolf-girl sidled away.

"Is everything okay?" Darinda said. "Don't be nervous. I don't bite."

Emma hesitated, as if struggling with something, or screwing up her courage. Finally she blurted, "You're a witch. That's almost like being human, right?"

"Somewhat," Darinda said dryly. "Don't let it get around."

"But you're human, sort'a," Emma persisted, "and you're okay with weres. Mom and Charlie and cousin Rod like you. So it does work. It can work."

Darinda nodded warily, wondering where the girl was going with this. Then it hit her. The overwhelming odors, her anxiety when interspecies interaction came up...

She touched Emma's forearm and had her suspicions confirmed. "You're dating a human," she said. Emma made a whimpery noise and nodded. Suddenly Darinda found her arms full of wailing teenage she-wolf. She waited for the tide to ebb before saying, "Want to tell me about him?"

"His name's Mario. I met him at school. His dad's a butcher down at the Italian Market. Mario helps out." She smiled suddenly, and the sun broke through the clouds. "He smells *heavenly*."

"Does he know you're a were?"

"Yeah. He thinks it's neat, having a girlfriend who can shift. But his family doesn't know and neither does mine, and I'm scared to say anything." She wiped at her eyes. "Eugene's all 'humans are monkeys and stupid' and if he knew about Mario he'd rip my tail off." She sniffled. "Eugene's a douche."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"So, can you, like, put a spell on him? So he won't hate humans any more?"

"Magic doesn't work that way. I wish it did. The world would be a nicer place. What about your sister? Isn't she on your side? Or Charlie. He gets along all right with humans. I'll bet he'd back you up. Doesn't Eugene do what Charlie tells him?"

"Yeah, but, they're, you know, guys. All chests out and tails in the air. They tell us shes what to do all the time. Is that how it is with humans? Do the males always boss you around?"

"They try," Darinda said, thinking of Roderick. In that regard, humans and weres weren't so far apart. "Fortunately they can be trained. If I were you, I'd fess up to your sister and win her support. I get the feeling if the two of you ganged up on Eugene, he'd back off in a hurry. In the meantime, if you can get down to South Street I can give you some herbal soaps and shampoos specially designed for weres. They'll hide his scent on you without driving everyone nuts."

"Really? You are so cool." Emma threw her arms around Darinda's neck just as Lucy poked her head in the door to see what the holdup was. "Emma! What did I tell you about biting Rod's guest?"

"I wasn't biting her." Emma loosened her chokehold but didn't let go. She faced Lucy with her head up and her eyes level. "Lucy, I have to tell you something. It's about that boy I'm seeing."

"You mean the human?"

Emma gawked. Lucy smiled. "I wondered when you'd finally come clean. I was getting tired of covering for you."

"So you're okay with it?"

"No. But I've been revising my views of humans lately, with Charlie on the force and Rod's recent problems and all." The look she sent Darinda held a flag of truce. "At least this one brings you meat. Just tone it down with the deodorant, okay? You're really getting hard on the nose."

* * * *

The women returned from the powder room to a table minus a male. "Charlie had to leave," Roderick said. "Police business. Eugene's offered to drive us home."

"If you do something for me." Eugene produced a deck of cards. "Rod says you can tell our futures with these."

Darinda thinned her lips. Would this twit's challenges never end? "More like suggest possibilities. The future can't be predicted because it isn't set."

"No? Rod says you told his future. How's it turning out?"

"Spot in one aspect." Roderick's cool yellow gaze swept over her in a manner that left her both nervous and tingly. "I'm still waiting for the other to kick in."

"Tell mine," Emma pleaded. "I want to know about, y'know, school and stuff."

Reluctantly, Darinda took the pack Eugene thrust at her. She returned to her seat beside Roderick, freed the cards, and shuffled. "I don't control this, so don't be upset if the reading is negative. And keep in mind, everything is open to interpretation."

Emma selected her card, the seven of hearts. With a prayer to the Goddess for only good news, Darinda began the deal. Her tension eased as all hearts and diamonds appeared, connecting the seven to the Ace of Hearts. "Well! Someone's got love and good luck in her future."

The teen beamed and bounced on her chair. Had she had her wolf tail, it would have wagged like mad. "As long as it isn't some stinking coyote," Eugene said.

Emma made a face. "C'mon. You know I'd never date a coyote." Lucy sniggered into her napkin.

A London Werewolf in America

Lucy declined a reading. "Had mine," Roderick said. Darinda smiled evilly and fanned the deck at Eugene. As usual, he backed off when confronted directly. "No thanks. I don't believe in that stuff."

Emma's little fangs flashed. "C'mon, Eugene. What are you scared of?"

"I'm not scared. I just think it's bunk, is all. Can you do a general one for the family? Kind of an overall thing?"

"It works better for an individual, but..." She decided to be generous and let him save face. "Okay. Everybody pick a card and make a pile in the center."

One by one they drew their cards. Emma got the seven of hearts again. Roderick, she saw with no surprise, selected the King of Spades. Lucy picked the ten of diamonds, Eugene the ten of clubs. "You too," Roderick insisted before she could shuffle the deck. "You're part of this."

She could have killed him. Well, maybe just slapped him on the snoot. He'd left her no graceful way out, not with all those wolf eyes on her. Cursing silently, Darinda drew a card. Queen of Hearts. She made a neat little pile on the table, careful to arrange the cards so the king and queen remained separated. "This will be pretty generic," she warned, "so don't expect much." She dealt the first card.

Ace of Spades.

It got worse. The entire circle came up black, clubs for trouble, spades for change. "Well, that can't be good," Eugene remarked. "What's with all the spades?"

"Negative change. Rough times ahead." Darinda kept her voice carefully flat. "I don't want to alarm anybody, but you should all stay on guard for the next couple of days. Charlie too." She hurriedly scooped up the cards and returned them to the pack. "It could just be a run of bad luck, but no point in taking chances."

"I'll tell him," Lucy said. She slid her arm around Emma's waist. "Thanks for nothing, Eugene."

"Me? What did I do?"

The check arrived. Without Charlie to argue, Roderick picked up the tab. He got up and went to the register, motioning Darinda to follow. She stood silently by while he settled the bill. "Sorry," she murmured at last. "I didn't mean to upset everybody. That's just how the cards came up."

"I know. Now tell me what they really said."

She knew better than to lie to him. "Death. Or a near miss. Soon." "Which one of us?"

"I don't know. That's the problem with a group read. It could be all of us, one of us, or none of us, just someone connected to us."

"Like Charlie, or Aunt Letty."

"Yes." She heaved a heavy breath. "Well, it can't be Emma. Her reading gave her a future. She's clean, by the way, and so's Lucy." She'd rested her hand on Lucy's back for a second as they'd left the restroom. "Neither are involved with coyotes or the attempts on your life."

"Good work there. How'd you all get so chummy so fast?"

"Girl stuff. Transcends species. Which leaves us with—"

Eugene stormed up, bristling. "Well, I hope you're happy," he snarled at Darinda. "You got the girls upset. Lucy and Emma are walking home. Said they need to 'talk.' I should just leave you two here."

Roderick surged forward, but Darinda beat him to it. She seized Eugene's wrist and yanked him toward her so that they stood nose to nose and eye to eye. "You should keep your yap shut, dog boy. I've had it up to here with your bull. Now tell me all about your dealings with coyotes."

"What? Coyotes? Dealings? Are you scatty?" He yanked free of her and jumped away. His blistering glare fixed on her chin. All bark and no bite, that was Eugene. "So I dated one once, so what? I won't make that mistake again. I was scratching for weeks."

"Alfie," Roderick pressed. "A coyote named Alfie. Know him?"

"Who? I just told you, I don't know any coyotes, other than that she that gave me fleas. I don't want to know any, either. If your buddy Alfie needs an accountant, he can go find someone else."

Roderick and Darinda exchanged a quick look. She nodded. "Just curious," Roderick said. "Go get the car."

"Ought to leave you here," Eugene groused. "You and your crazy ape." But he obeyed.

"Clean?" Roderick said when he had gone.

"As a whistle. Your cousins are off the hook."

"That's relief. Nice move with Eugene, by the way." He grinned. "We'll make a wolf of you yet."

Eugene pulled up in front of the restaurant, and drove them back to Meadowlands in petulant silence. Roderick said every little. With both the Meadows and Duquense clans now eliminated, that left only the Chases in England. Either one of his sisters, his brother, or his mother had apparently ordered his death.

At one point he growled over some disquieting thought and shifted position on the seat. His hand came to rest on her arm. He moved it almost immediately. "Excuse me. I forgot about the touch problem."

She didn't pull away. "Don't worry about it."

Eugene pulled up by the side of the house, next to Darinda's car. A single light burned in the kitchen. Both weres figuratively pricked their ears the moment they got out of the car. Darinda watched them sniff the air then dart for the back of the house. "Stay there!" Roderick ordered her over his shoulder.

The hell she would. They'd left Aunt Letty alone with coyotes on the loose. The threat implied by her prophecy rolled over her like an avalanche. Snatching up her shoulder bag, she bolted after the wolves.

Her nose came nowhere near a wolf's, but her heightened sensitivity easily picked up the tension in the kitchen. But no blood. No death. Not here. Not Letty. Yet something had left the older she-wolf shivering and upset at her kitchen table, with both the males pressed close to her, bristling and growling.

Charlie. That call from the police—

All three looked up sharply at her entrance. Roderick's eyes flashed. She hadn't obeyed him. Tough. Ignoring him, Darinda said, "What's going on?"

Letty huddled closer to Eugene. "Oh, it's so horrible. Charles called not ten minutes ago. Albert Duquesne has been shot."

Chapter 10

Roderick insisted on going. He was bound to the Duquesne pack, which made them family. Regardless of how he felt about them, they were now his responsibility. He also insisted Darinda accompany him. While Eugene comforted his distraught mother, Darinda checked through her massive shoulder bag and its meager collection of generic spells and hoped something in it could help.

"You realize," she said carefully on the drive to Lupin Hill, "we could be interfering in a police investigation."

"Hang the police. This is family. Charlie will expect me to come. Why else do you think he called?"

Almost as soon as they entered the house Darinda realized he was right. Charlie was the only officer present, and he welcomed Roderick with a quick, grim nod. "Thank Lycaon you're here. The family's frantic."

Roderick got right to the point. "How's Albert?"

"Alive," Charlie said, "but in bad shape. The doctor's already here." He noticed Darinda behind Roderick. "You know any healing spells?"

"It's not my forte, but I'll do what I can. Will they let me near him?"

"They bloody well better," Roderick snarled. "Take us to him."

The pack had brought Albert to the den. He lay on the floor, atop a buffalo rug. A wiry form, human in shape but not aura, crouched beside him. Ellis hovered at the croucher's shoulder, alternately growling and whining. Nora stood nearby, a twin clutched in each arm. Coraline wailed and howled. Cole stood white-faced in a corner, apart from the rest of the pack.

The doctor glanced up when they entered. Fangs flashed at Darinda from within a dark-skinned face. To her surprise, she knew him. Dr. Clark was a vampire, and one of her regular customers. "Yo, Lowell! Fancy meeting you here. Join the party." "I'm not a healer."

"Any port in a storm. Get over here. He's bleeding all over the place."

She started forward automatically, but Ellis lunged into her path. His flash of fangs was nowhere near as friendly. Roderick brutally shouldered him aside. "She's with me. She can help."

"She's human." Ellis's voice had devolved so far down to a growl Darinda could barely understand him. "It was a human that shot him!"

"Not this human."

Ellis didn't hear him. Too far gone. The situation might have escalated into full-blown alpha challenge except Nora leaped in between Roderick and her mate. Then Coraline flung herself into Roderick's arms and started to sob loudly against his chest. "Maybe you'd better wait in the other room," Charlie murmured to Darinda.

She glanced at Clark. He grimaced unhappily. The tension in the room was thick enough to choke a griffin, not at all what Albert needed just now. She let Charlie escort her from the den.

In the dining room, out of sight and scent of the hair-trigger wolves, she asked Charlie, "How did it happen?"

"Two shots to the chest. Right in the back yard." Charlie paced restlessly along the length of the dinner table. "A neighbor heard gunshots and called 911. Luckily the dispatcher knows this is were territory. That's how I got the call. Good thing, too. Ellis is going scatty. He'd have ripped a human cop to pieces." He stopped pacing and faced her. "You probably shouldn't be here."

"Tell that to Roderick. I want to help."

"I wish you could, but walking in there with your ape smell won't do any good right now." He cocked his head at her. "How good are you at forensics?"

"Worse than I am at healing. You want me to try to trace the bullets?"

"It'd be a help." Charlie growled softly. "I'm betting they're silver."

Like the knife from Kelly Drive. "Ellis said a human shot him. Are you sure?"

"The smell's all over the yard. Human odor's hard to fake. Now, normally I'd write this up as your basic species crime, but you and Rod brought in the coyote angle. Coyotes don't follow wolf protocol, and they don't mind working with humans. They want territory, but they won't put themselves in danger. They'll find a way that keeps them clean."

"How does shooting Albert help? He's beta."

"It's the beta's job to protect the alpha. Maybe Ellis was the target, and Albert got hit by mistake."

"This still doesn't explain why they've attacked Roderick. He doesn't own territory here in America. He doesn't even have a pack."

"He'll get both when he mates with Coraline. You want to destroy a pack, you decimate the top ranks. The coyotes wouldn't want a strong new alpha to come in and mess up their plans."

"But how do they know he's here to marry Coraline? According to every wolf I've talked to, nobody knows any coyotes."

Charlie scratched the back of his neck. "You got me there. I didn't want to admit it, but it's looking more and more like an inside job."

"I will admit it," Darinda said. "We had the Duquesnes pegged at first, but now—"

She broke off. Even silver bullets wouldn't cause bleeding a vampire couldn't stop. But if they had a specific spell on them... She rushed from the dining room, back to the den.

Someone, probably Nora, had gotten Ellis seated on the couch. He leaped up when Darinda dashed in, a snarl on his lips. She barely spared him a glance. She dropped down beside Albert, opposite Clark. Albert's pallid complexion and gaspy breaths frightened her. "Have you found the bullets?"

"Not yet. They're in pretty deep. I can't get him stabilized."

He said more, but she barely heard him. She could taste the magic on her tongue, fluid and slippery. The silver bullets had indeed been spelled, just like the knife. "Roderick," she said, "there's a vial in my bag labeled *cleanser*. I need it."

He darted at once to fetch her bag. The second he left Ellis's side the Duquesne alpha launched himself at Darinda. She slammed him back onto the couch with a gesture and closed her fist. Thickened air pinned him in place. "Don't interrupt. I think I know what's wrong and I think I can save him."

Ellis strained against the air. "Take your stinking paws off him, you damned dirty ape!"

Darinda snapped her hand. Ellis's jaw clacked shut and stayed shut. Wordlessly Roderick handed over her bag and joined Charlie and Nora by the couch. Coraline grabbed his arm and hugged herself to his side. Camilla and Bentley had gone wolf and shivered together at their mother's feet.

"So, Lowell, what we got?" Clark said.

"A flow spell, laid on the bullets. It's meant to keep water running, but it works on any liquid. That's why he won't stop bleeding." She sprinkled the cleanser liberally over Albert's wounds and chanted the strongest spellbreaker she knew. He'd lost so much blood already, no telling if she was in time.

Abruptly the cords of magic snapped. The fresh, lively scent of the cleanser swept out the filthy reek of death. A greasy gray cloud misted out of the bullet holes, hovered a moment over Albert's chest, then melted away. Darinda sat back, suddenly weak in the limbs.

"All *right*," Clark said. "Now we're cooking." He poured a gummy liquid from his own bag into Albert's wounds. The bleeding stopped almost at once. Albert's skin remained waxen, but his breathing evened out.

Darinda was impressed. "Coagulant?"

"Old family recipe." Clark grinned. "Managing blood is a vampire specialty. No way I'm digging into him here. He's coming back to my office."

"Will he make it?" Roderick said.

"Too soon to tell. Who wants to help me load him up?"

The entire family moved as one, including Ellis once Darinda released him. He didn't look at her. Neither did any of the others. They lifted Albert, bloody rug and all, and carried him outside. Charlie went ahead to open doors.

Clark's ambulance sat at the side of the house, near Charlie's Crown Vic. Darinda hadn't even noticed the two vehicles when she'd pulled up. She helped Clark open the back and set up the gurney. "You finally got an ambulance. I was wondering."

"Had to. You put a siren on a hearse and people look at you funny. You did good, Lowell. Want a job?"

"Already got one." She hopped down and stayed well out of the way while the Duquesnes bundled Albert into the ambulance. Ellis climbed in with him. Clark took off with siren blaring and lights stabbing red at the trees.

"I'm going to need statements from everyone," Charlie said to Nora. "You up to it?"

Whimpering, she nodded. She herded the still-wolf twins inside. Cole had taken Coraline's arm and guided her unsteady steps back to the house. Charlie brought up the rear.

To her surprise Darinda found Roderick beside her. "I thought you went inside," she said.

"Not yet. I'll have to stay, just for a bit. They need the comfort of an alpha's presence. It's best you stay clear. They're sensitive just now."

"I understand."

She started for the car, but he touched her arm. Before she could guess what he had in mind he bent his head and kissed her.

The kiss took her completely by surprise. She hadn't expected his mouth to be so gentle or so warm on hers. Wolves had a reputation for sudden, ravenous attacks. This held unguessed-at caring, a request instead of a demand. Before she knew what was happening she had submitted, surrendering to instinct. She leaned into his embrace and opened her lips to his tender assault, reveling in the flood of heady sensation the contact between them brought.

When he finally released her, she couldn't let him go. She didn't trust her legs to hold her up. He arched a brow, amused. "Did I do it wrong?"

"Nuh." Darinda cleared her throat. "N-no. That was just right." She waited for her galloping pulse to slow to a trot. "What was that about?"

"For standing by us. For helping Albert. They'll never thank you. They don't appreciate help from a human. I do. I wanted you to know."

Okay, heart, Darinda thought, slow down or there's going to be serious trouble. Where in Hecate's name did a werewolf learn how to kiss like a human? And to get so damned good at it, too. "You're welcome."

He draped his arm around her waist. This time the possessiveness didn't rankle so much. "Come inside. I want you near."

She didn't resist his guiding her back to the house. "I'm glad to see you've overcome your aversion to touching," he said.

That snapped her out of it. "Bite me."

"Later, perhaps."

He brought her to the dining room and left her with a wolf's kiss, a brief flick of his tongue against her cheek. "I won't be long, I promise. I just need to see they're settled."

"Take your time," she mumbled to the empty room. With him gone she could think more clearly, breathe more easily again.

This was bad. This was disastrous. Casual attraction was one thing. You looked, you lusted, you smiled and moved on. Serious attraction, where your urges waved torches and pitchforks and stormed the castle of good common sense, was another monster entirely.

He was a wolf. A carnivore, a predator. Arrogant, overbearing, possessive and bigoted. Also thoughtful, protective, gentle, generous and considerate. He was a creature of power, emotion and instinct, just like a witch.

A kiss is just a kiss, she told herself. It didn't have to mean anything. It *couldn't* mean anything. He was getting married in less than a week, for Goddess's sake.

The King of Spades, married to the Queen of Hearts. If only she could get that pesky reading out of her mind.

She caught herself pacing around the dining room table and stopped. In the silence she gradually became aware of a vaguely-familiar tapping sound. Eager for distraction, she followed it.

The sound guided her to a small room toward the back of the house. By the time she arrived in the doorway she'd placed it: fingers tapping on a keyboard. The door stood ajar. She glanced inside.

The room had the look of a large pantry, converted into small guest quarters. It had just enough space for a cot, a bureau, and the desk where Cole Duquesne sat with a laptop. He read the message on the screen and typed in a reply. Then he paused and sniffed the air.

Darinda rapped on the door. "It's just me."

"I know." He signed off and shut the laptop before he turned around. "Does Officer Meadows want me?"

"Not yet, I don't think. I heard you on the computer."

"Oh. Yeah. Chat room," he explained. "I had to talk to somebody. The shes are all, just, you know." Belatedly, he motioned to her. "C'mon in."

"This is fine." Small as it was, this was still Cole's space, and she didn't want to intrude. As an omega he had little enough of his own, as these

skimpy quarters attested. "I didn't realize weres had chat rooms. Or used computers, for that matter. Silly. Why wouldn't you?"

"It's more common than it used to be," Cole said. "Uncle Ellis won't touch it. Too old school. He just growls at it. The twins are more with it. Camilla's on Facebook. Bentley likes the games." He looked at the floor. She noted his room had no window. "How's Uncle Albert?"

"No word yet. I'm sure he'll be all right. You can help out, you know. You could go to your family."

Cole snorted. "And do what?"

"Well, it seems to me you're currently the household's ranking male. Unless you think Bentley can handle it?"

"Hey, you're right." He jumped up and dashed past her, head up and spine straightened from its habitual omega slouch. Darinda chuckled. She was just full of good deeds tonight.

Alone again, she wandered back to the dining room and from there to the foyer. She found the foyer chairs more comfortable. So comfortable, in fact, she hadn't even realized she'd fallen asleep in one until Roderick's gentle shake on her shoulder awakened her. "Uh?" she responded groggily. "What time is it?"

"Late," he murmured. "Ellis is back, and he's in full paranoid alpha mode. We both need to get our tails out of here. Charlie's already gone."

"Albert?"

"The doctor thinks he'll make it, but he'll be a long time in recovery. There's nothing more we can do."

No one came to show them out. They left quietly.

On the way back to Meadowlands Darinda related her conversation with Charlie. "It isn't just you," she said. "It's all of you. All the higher ranks."

"The hunt's on." His eyes lit with a vicious rage she thanked the Goddess wasn't meant for her. "Enough of this. It's time we took steps."

* * * *

"Leave?" Aunt Letty said, aghast. "Absolutely not."

"Absolutely yes. They're targeting high-rankers, and I won't put you in danger. You're to stay in the city with Eugene until I settle this."

"Or until they settle you," Eugene said. "Forgive my bluntness, but are you scatty? You'll be alone up here in coyote territory. You might as well stick a bull's-eye on your back."

"He won't be alone," Darinda said. "I'll be here."

"Like that'll help."

Letty silenced her son with a lift of her lip. "Roddy, this is unacceptable. I won't let a pack of coyotes drive me out of my home. Besides, I promised your mother—"

"Mother's not here. You're leaving with Eugene, and that's the end of it."

"I'm calling Charles."

"He'll back me up. Put your hackles down, it's decided. Now, what do you need?"

And that was that. They surrendered to the will of the alpha. Darinda stood off to the side while Eugene helped his mother put together an overnight bag. "I'll be back tomorrow for whatever else she needs," he said. He reeked of relief. "Charlie will swing by here as often as he can."

"Warn him to be careful. He could be a target as well." Roderick pitched this low, so Aunt Letty wouldn't catch it. "The rest of you ought to be safe enough."

"I hope." Eugene stuffed his hands into his pockets. "I wouldn't be you for anything."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence."

Eugene took Aunt Letty's bag, and all three of them escorted her to Eugene's car. Darinda cast her senses as far as she could, and kept a wary eye on the yard, the trees, and the city reservoir fence across the street. She saw too much undergrowth for comfort, but no yellow gleam of were eyes. Roderick, she noticed, did the same as she, his nose amply filling in for a telepathic scan.

"You call me every day," Aunt Letty said to him, even as Eugene helped her into his car. She turned unexpectedly to Darinda. "And you, dear, you watch out for him. And do look after yourself." Darinda could only nod mutely.

They watched the car until its taillights were lost behind a curve in the drive then returned to the house. "Nobody's around," Darinda said. "Not within my range. I think the fun's over for tonight."

Roderick slammed into the house and stalked about the parlor. Darinda shut and locked the door. "Eugene's right, you know," she said. "All you've done is make yourself an easier target."

"I'm already a target. No point in putting family in the crosshairs." He stopped pacing. "Or you. You needn't stay."

"You hired me to protect you."

"All right, then, you're fired."

She shook her head. "I can't. I can't walk away while someone's plotting deliberate harm. Anyway, I promised Aunt Letty I'd watch out for you."

"And a witch's oath is sacrosanct." His mouth twitched, the start of a smile. "All right. I can use a second pair of eyes. Pity there's nothing we can do about that sorry human nose of yours."

"I have other resources."

"Excellent ones, as I've observed. Perhaps this is best. You're still convinced someone close to me is behind this?"

"The cards have never lied to me."

"Scat." He began to pace again, a feral beast in a shrinking cage. "You know, I'd nearly convinced myself Mother was behind this. But she has no reason to kill Albert Duquesne. Or Ellis Duquesne, for that matter."

"Maybe we should keep tabs on your family. If they're not behind this, they could be targets, too." She ignored his cynical snort. "Do you have a computer with Internet access at home? Do you know how to use one?"

"Of course. I don't much care for it, though. The screen hurts my eyes."

Darinda considered. She'd been all over Meadowlands her first day here, as part of her security duties. Aunt Letty didn't own a computer, or even a cell phone. Old school, as Cole Duquesne would put it. "I'll bet Emma's got Internet. She can email your family in England. Find out if your mother's had any unexplained brushes with death lately. Or if she has connections here in Philadelphia."

She grew self-consciously aware of his intent stare, and the light that had kindled in his eyes. She held herself perfectly still. Any move could provoke a predator. "What?"

"I did right to choose you. No beta could serve better, or show such courage and compassion. Those are traits you find only in alphas. Lycaon. I never thought I'd catch myself saying such things to a human." Darinda sniffed to hide how touched she was. "I'm overwhelmed."

"I trust you," he said simply. "In everything. Anywhere but behind the wheel of a car."

She had to smile at that. "So what's our next move?" he continued.

She glanced at the wall clock. It was nearly three in the morning. The realization brought the whole night thudding down around her. She was suddenly very, very tired. "Bed sounds like a good idea to me."

Oops. Wrong phrasing, as his eager growl attested. "I meant sleep," she clarified quickly.

"I couldn't possibly sleep right now."

"That's no problem. I know a couple techniques—"

"So do I."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know." His eyes still held a feral gleam, but his stance had gone to a slump. "Bad timing, worse circumstances. But Lycaon bite it, we're alone here now, and you're an attractive female. You can't expect me not to notice." He grinned wickedly. "Or you either."

Damn his sensitive nose. He could probably sniff out every step on her slide down the path to arousal. "We're both tired," she said, "and pumped with adrenaline. You're right. Bad timing, bad circumstances."

"Will the circumstances ever be good?"

"Not as long as you're engaged. I can't break an oath, and I won't help another break theirs."

"No. Of course you won't." He puffed out a sigh with a growl in it. "A million shes in this monkey town and I get the one with scruples."

"Look on the bright side. When this is over you'll have a mate. That should solve that problem."

"Unless she's the one trying to kill me."

"The clingy blonde drooling all over you? Somehow I doubt it."

He flashed a grin at her. "Someone sounds jealous."

"You wish." Darinda rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. "I need sleep. We both need sleep. Let me check the wards, then we can work out some kind of plan in the morning."

The wards on his room remained secure. He tried to say something to her, but she brushed past him and locked herself in the bathroom. Too tired to shower, she slathered on the toothpaste and attacked her teeth with a vengeance.

Jealous, feh. Who did he think he was? What did he think *she* was? Probably used to having women of all sorts of species falling all over him. Well, just because he'd damn near kissed her socks off didn't mean she was ready to roll over onto her back and let the wolf have his way with her.

She didn't mind a bit of male company now and again. However, being a witch meant maintaining control, or else the magics could run amuck. Roderick threatened her control. If she followed his lead and gave in to her instincts, it would only lead to disaster.

Then there was Coraline, Roderick's betrothed. Tangling herself up in a werewolf mating—Good goddess, "disaster" didn't even start to cover that.

All she had to do was keep her distance. Look, maybe lust if she had to, but don't touch. That way she could keep him safe and herself in the bargain. If she solved this puzzle quickly she could get back to serving the things that went bump in the night without wanting to bump bellies with her.

She reached her room unscathed. Bless the Goddess she'd had the foresight to pack a nightgown. She slipped it on over her head. Darinda preferred to sleep nude, but not in these circumstances. Not with a hungry wolf prowling around outside her door.

The prowler rapped, and she jumped. "Darinda. May I come in?"

The knob was already turning. She bowed to the inevitable and flung the door open. "Yes?"

Goddess damn him. All he had on was a towel, draped precariously about his loins. Her carefully-crafted resolve nearly crumbled like a castle gate before the battering ram. He didn't wait for whatever response she might have managed. He lunged straight to the point. "I think you should sleep in my room tonight," he said.

Don't look at the towel. Don't look at the towel. "Roderick, we just went over this."

"Not for that. For mutual security. My room is protected. Yours isn't. If we're to be attacked, I'd rather we were together. Safety in numbers, and all that."

"I don't think we'll be attacked tonight."

"I didn't think I'd be jumped outside of a bar my first night in your country, yet here we are." He assessed her expression, and sniffed. "I assure you, nothing untoward will happen."

"Uh huh. And the minute you get me into your bed—"

He blurred. The towel pooled on the hardwood floor around the black wolf's paws. He looked up at her with an arch expression on his muzzle and wagged his tail.

Okay. Props for trustworthiness. Darinda conceded defeat. "You'd better not change back after I fall asleep."

He huffed, affronted, and stalked away. She followed him into his room.

The floor was miraculously clear of dropped clothing, the bed smartly made and neatly turned down. Knowing no outsider could have entered, she regarded Roderick with new respect. He thinned his yellow eyes at her. *We keep our dens tidy*, he said in her head. *What do you take me for?*

Several things, but she didn't list them. He hopped onto the bed. Warily she climbed in and slid under the sheets. He turned around twice and lay beside her. His fur gave before the round solidity of her hip.

She touched his pelt. She couldn't help herself. Beneath its thickness she found muscles rigid as basalt. She kneaded his neck and shoulders until they lost their tension. Roderick yawned mightily. *That's nice*.

"Just so you know," she said, "I'm not normally a dog person."

Just as well. I'm not a dog.

Darinda chuckled. Oh, he was a dog, all right. Somehow she couldn't work up any real anger toward him. She settled comfortably under the covers, while he settled his flank against her back. Seconds later he was asleep. Seconds after that, so was she.

Chapter 11

Only one short shaft of dream penetrated Darinda's sound sleep. In it, she hovered over the bed at ceiling height and watched Roderick watching her sleep. He still lay tight against her back, but had resumed his human form. His hand caressed her gently, but only where the blanket covered her. He pressed his nose into her hair and inhaled deeply, as if he meant to memorize her scent. The tip of his tongue escaped through his parted lips and brushed against her cheek.

With a breathy sigh the sleeping Darinda smiled and rolled over toward him. Her slumbering self accepted the warmth of his palm cupping her face, and the more human-style kiss he bestowed on her lips.

She watched his body tighten and heat flare up in his eyes. The prey lay helpless, his for the taking. Hunger warred with propriety while she lay pliant and unresisting in his arms. At last he leaned back with a little irritated growl. The fire in his eyes had banked into a hot glow of longing. He shook his head, shoved himself off the bed, and stalked out of the room.

He had an erection the size of a Clydesdale's.

Darinda jolted awake, her heart thudding. What the hell?

She turned at once to Roderick's side of the bed. The spot where he'd lain was till warm and still wolf-sized. No impression of human arms or legs or human anything else marred the covers. Clearly nothing untoward had happened, just as he had promised.

Tell that to her pulse rate or the tingle between her legs.

"Crap," she greeted the day, and bolted out of the bed like it contained snakes. Sex dreams about a werewolf? She'd hit a new personal low.

She took a leisurely shower, and spent more time than normal choosing her garb for the day. Even she recognized these as delaying tactics. She had no intention of facing Roderick until she felt ready. Even though he had done nothing, and would do nothing. And neither would she, so there. By the time she emerged cautiously from her bedroom, a delicious odor had crept upstairs. It went right up her nose and down into her stomach and reminded her dinner had only been a salad, and that nearly twelve hours ago. Who was cooking? Had Aunt Letty returned against orders? Curious, she padded downstairs.

To her surprise, she found Roderick busy at the stove. "About time," he greeted her. "The sun's been up for ages. There's no coffee, but Aunt Letty keeps a generous assortment of teas. Are you all right with eggs?"

"Tea's perfect. I can do eggs, but fruit's better. Let me see what she's got."

"No, you sit." He motioned to the kitchen table and the chair already pulled out for her. A basket of warm muffins sat beside her plate, along with a fruit bowl laden with grapes and strawberries and a single ripe banana that jutted toward her like—like a banana, she corrected herself with mental alacrity.

He spotted her look and frowned. "The banana's not meant as an insult. I found it atop the fridge."

"I'm not offended." She took her seat. "I *am* surprised. I didn't know you could cook or that you'd even bother."

"And where would we be right now if that were the case? All the higher ranks are expected to be able to provide for the pack. Feed the pups and all that. I can drive a car, too. I haven't insisted on it because I don't know my way around. Or did you assume I let others ferry me about while I hang my head out the window?"

"I assumed low-ranks handled the day-to-day chores."

"Yes, normally that's the case. But since one slip-up can make you a low-rank, it pays to be prepared."

He demonstrated his preparedness by expertly cracking eggs into a frying pan. Darinda didn't look at the eggs or the pan. Instead she studied the jeans he wore. They fit deliciously snug on him, fore and aft. She couldn't help remembering the dream. Assuming, of course, she'd been dreaming...

He paused before the stove. "Is there any particular reason why you're staring at my trousers?"

"Who, me? I'm not staring." To distract them both, she reached blindly for the fruit bowl. Her hand closed around the banana. Of course. Too late to back out now. She ripped off the peel and crammed a huge bite into her mouth. Again too late, she realized what that must look like. Fortunately Roderick had turned back to his eggs. His butt muscles twitched as if wagging an invisible tail.

She forced herself to chew her bite of banana into mush before she swallowed. "What I meant was," she said carefully, "are those still Charlie's clothes?"

"My only option, for the moment. Until the airline recovers my luggage or I can get to a clothing store, this is all I've got. Luckily Charlie and I are close in size."

Not to mention equal in rank. She couldn't picture Roderick lowering himself to put on Eugene's hand-me-downs. "You look good in jeans," she blurted. Oh crap again.

"Thank you. If you promise not to take offense, let me say you look stunning this morning."

Stunning, right. In a simple blouse, tan slacks she hadn't had time to press, tennis shoes and with her hair still damp from the shower she could pass for Miss America. "You'd say that if I had a sack on."

"Yes. Because it would be true."

"You just want me in your bed again."

"For starters. What man wouldn't?"

"You'd be surprised," she said. Human men topped the list. The reality of a witch and a witch's power was more than most could take. Good thing witches were solitary by nature or she wouldn't be able to stand it as well as she had.

The teakettle screamed for attention, deflecting the path of their conversation. Just in the nick of time. Roderick found cold cereal in one of the cupboards and brought a bowl, corn flakes, and milk to the table. While she poured herself a helping and adorned it with strawberries, he loaded his plate with eggs and a hunk of Canadian bacon. She couldn't help wrinkling her nose, and he couldn't help lifting his lip. "I'm going to eat this whether you approve or not."

"Go ahead. I won't stop you. Part of 'do no harm' includes not forcing my views onto others." She stirred her corn flakes and heaved a sigh. "I still miss sausage pizza." Roderick brought their tea to the table then seated himself. "If it makes you feel any better, I could never stomach liver. Mother used to make the most wretched blood pies. It's just as well the lower ranks handle the kitchen chores." He forked eggs and bacon into his mouth and chewed thoroughly. No wolfing his meal for this were. Or perhaps he was merely being polite in her presence. He washed it down with a sip of tea. "Your turn again."

"For what?"

"Tell me something about yourself. Here we are facing mortal peril together and I know next to nothing about you."

"I'm a witch. That about sums it up."

"Oh, come, I know there's more. Your name, for instance. 'Darinda.' Rather unusual."

"That was Dad's little joke. He named me after a character on an old TV sitcom, another clueless mortal male who married into a coven of witches. My twin brother Paul was supposed to get it, but Mom insisted on naming him after her favorite uncle. I guess we ought to be grateful the Harry Potter books weren't big then. They probably would have named us Ron and Hermoine."

"Trash," Roderick pronounced. "Almost as bad as those horrid romances. They show such a skewed view of us, and they always get everything wrong."

"Hmmmm, not everything. Vampires really do—"

"So you're a fan."

"Peri," she said hurriedly. "Peri reads them. I may have glanced at a couple." He lifted a brow. She set down her spoon. "Oh, all right. I admit it. I like fairy tales. I like the happy endings. Witches don't get many of those. It's comforting to know they're out there for somebody." She cupped her chin in her hands and smiled at him. "So how about you? Or don't werewolves read? The trashy books don't say."

"Of course we can read." He looked uncomfortable, and cut off a big chunk of bacon to forestall his reply. "Don't let on to Aunt Letty, but I was always rather taken with that French author. The one who wrote all those American Westerns."

"French?"

"Louis L'Amour."

Her laughter overrode his growl. Once she explained, even he saw the humor of it. "No wonder he was so fascinated with your Wild West. But if he's going to write those things, he needs an appropriate name. Zane Grey and Max Brand are Western writer names. Gross misrepresentation, that's what that is." He stabbed his fork into his eggs with a vengeance. "We can't just sit here and wait for them to attack. We need to take action."

"I'd love to. Tell me what. They've got numbers and the advantage of knowing who we are and where to find us. I can't even pin down a motive." She stirred her corn flakes disconsolately. "I suck as a bodyguard."

"You most certainly do not. You probably saved Albert's life."

"Thanks. There is that. But if we intend to carry the fight to then, we're going to need—"

The wall phone went off like an alarm. Roderick and Darinda exchanged a look, then Roderick got up to answer it. "Yes." Pause. "Yes, this is he. Really?" A long stretch of silence followed. Roderick listened with interest, and Darinda watched him with interest. "Absolutely," Roderick said. "We'll be ready."

He hung up and turned to her. "Well. Perhaps there's some hope after all. Don't make any plans for this evening. We've been summoned to an audience with the King."

* * * *

Darinda drove Roderick into Center City for a tour of Philadelphia's most exclusive clothing stores. One did not go before the King Wolf of Philadelphia in a cousin's castoffs. However, she balked when Roderick insisted on purchasing a gown for her to match his new suit. "You're my pack," he pointed out. "Your appearance reflects on my reputation. Do you want him to think I can't take care of my followers?"

She stared at the price tag in dismay. "This would cover my rent for six months."

"Relax. I'll charge it to my business account. Mother will pick up the tab. I'm sure she wouldn't want her son to look bad in front of the King."

He smiled when he said it, or showed teeth, at least. Darinda let the green and silver silk creation flow between her hands and imagined how it would look and feel on her body. Maybe the Chase clan did owe her something for services rendered after all.

At precisely six-thirty a black sedan pulled up to Meadowlands. Two muscular wolves in roomy sport coats came to the door and escorted them to the car. Neither spoke beyond as few polite "sirs" and "ma'ams" as necessary. Their sharp stares took in everything—the house, the road, the layout. The driver never went over the speed limit, even on the Schuylkill Expressway. "Did we just drop into a gangster movie?" Roderick whispered in her ear.

"Big Alex has his way of doing things. I just hope he doesn't pull out his *Sopranos* DVDs. We could be there all night."

The driver pulled up before a restaurant on Lombard Street—Italian, Darinda saw with no surprise. The driver stayed with the car while the other henchwolf ushered them inside and into the King's presence.

Big Alex Vittori came by his nickname honestly. He stood six-four and boasted a gut roughly the size of a blimp. His hair, red as marinara, stood out on his scalp in blunt-cut bristles. Knowing his age, Darinda suspected he dyed it. He greeted them heartily. "Darinda Lowell, the witch of South Street. Mama, you look good enough to eat. Hey, just funnin'. We don't do that no more. You must be the Brit."

"Roderick Chase," Roderick said stiffly. He stepped forward, placing himself between her and the other were. They did not shake hands. They stood apart and sniffed each other's air without making a show of it. Once each decided the other wasn't worth a challenge, their postures relaxed fractionally.

"C'mon in," the King Wolf invited. "Take a load off." He made shooing motions at the were behind them. The wolf went to stand by the door.

They followed Big Alex to a large table that afforded them a full view of the interior. For a restaurant at the dinner hour, the place seemed awfully empty to Darinda. The few occupied tables hosted males with a handful of hard-eyed shes. She scanned and confirmed her suspicions. The "customers" were all weres, all in clothing loose enough to be shed in a blink, all strategically placed. She recalled Aunt Letty's comment of how alphas rarely reached old age. True, unless you had the money and power to surround yourself with a pack of finely-honed killers. This being a were meeting, food came before business. Big Alex had spaghetti with meat sauce, topped with meatballs the size of tennis balls. Roderick enjoyed the same. Darinda went with fettuccini alfredo. "This is excellent," she said to Big Alex.

"It better be. I own the place. Now. Word is you got coyote trouble."

Roderick related the tale of his so-far disastrous stay in America. Big Alex listened attentively and pushed for details. All of Philadelphia was his territory. Anything bad that happened to a wolf on his turf reflected badly on him. "Sounds more like it's apes making runs at you," he pointed out.

"Working for coyotes. The ones who attacked me took their orders from Alfie. I'm told coyotes are more at ease around humans than we are."

"Than most of us, you mean." Big Alex winked at Darinda. "Witch bodyguard. Smart move. That ought'a shake 'em up."

"Not necessarily," Darinda said, and told him about the charmed knife and the spelled silver bullets. Big Alex's expression darkened. Clearly he hadn't been given all the specifics of Albert Duquesne's shooting. "The spells were generic," she concluded, "so I can't track the witch working with them. But they didn't waste any time turning to magic too."

"So they upped the stakes, did they? Okay. This has gotta stop. Used to be everybody knew where they stood. We stayed clear of the apes and the bats, and they kept off our turf. Then one morning you wake up and Wissahickon's gone to the prairie dogs. Having apes take shots at us. Now magic too? That's it. Stinkin' mutts need to learn their place." He impaled a meatball on his fork and ripped a bite out of it for emphasis. "Time I took a real hard look at the park. You pups relax. I think we can have the vermin cleared out toot sweet."

"We appreciate the help," Roderick said.

"Hey, least I can do for the pup of an old friend. So how's your mom these days? Still the queen bitch?"

Roderick nearly dropped his fork. "You know Mother?"

"Lycaon yeah, I know your mom. She was a regular, back in the day. Her and her sister. How else you think Letitia met George? It ain't like now, you got email and that. They'd spend weeks over here. Building ties with us American packs. Strength in numbers and all. Ain't that why you're here? To mate with a Duquesne?"

"That was the general plan."

"Yeah, I seen the girl. Not a bad looker in either form." He leered knowingly at Roderick. "You lucky mutt. If I was thirty years younger, I'd sniff her myself."

"Is she in the Registry? I didn't see her name."

"The Registry?" Big Alex's forehead furrowed. "We ain't bothered with the Registry in a dog's age. You still think it matters? Yeah, guess you would. You Brits are so hot on proper breeding. Speaking of hot—don't take this the wrong way, puppy, but your mama was a looker too. I even figured once—well, I didn't figure long. That one was alpha right out'a the womb. Scared even me. I'd'a mated with her, she'd be running the city right now and I'd be sleeping in the Schuylkill, y'know what I'm saying? And there wouldn't be no coyotes in Fairmount Park. No offense."

"None taken," Roderick said. "That's Mother spot on."

"Watch you don't take after her, or I might have to kill you." He didn't sound like he was joking. "You watch your step with this one, Lowell. He's got even half his mama in him, you could end up in serious scat."

She managed a smile. "I'll be careful."

"Yeah, you two watch your backs. I can clear out the trash, but it'll take time to sweep up. Letitia safe?"

"She's in the city with her pups."

"Atta boy. I got a couple'a betas headed to your place even as we speak. That ought'a keep the riffraff out. Just the same, don't go taking no chances. Them coyotes, they're wily little bastards."

"That's awfully generous of you."

"Yeah well, we're the City of Brotherly Love. We got a rep to maintain."

With the completion of the meal, the audience came to an end. Big Alex saw them to the door, where their escorts waited. "Nice meeting you," Big Alex said.

No one spoke on the ride back to Meadowlands. As the sedan pulled up to the house two canine-shaped shadows moved in the darkness, one in the side yard, one across the street. One of the wolves got out of the car and gestured. The shadows receded. The wolf saw them to the door, nodded silently, and left them. "I need a Tums," Darinda announced as soon as they got inside. She rubbed her stomach, her wistful hopes of weight loss banished. "I had no idea so many werewolf rituals revolved around food."

"Old habits die hard," Roderick said. "Lycaon's tail, did you *see* him? How does he shift? How does he keep that belly from dragging on the pavement?"

"I've never seen Big Alex in his wolf form, now that you mention it. I don't think I want to, either."

"Regardless of his appearance, he struck me as a wolf of his word. I think the worst may be over."

A lie. He was too subdued, distracted, and Darinda feared she knew why. It would hang between them like an open wound until somebody voiced it.

It fell to her, of course. She was the bodyguard. "Your mother," she said. "She used to come to Philadelphia. She was a regular visitor."

"Yes."

"She might have made contacts. Long-term contacts."

"She would," he said. "It would be like her." Abruptly he strode to the door. "I'd better have a word with our watchdogs. We don't want them jumping Charlie or Eugene by mistake."

"Better tell them about the wards on your room," she said, but he'd already slammed the door behind him.

Darinda stood and stared at the door, slumped inside her beautiful expensive silk gown. She wanted to reassure him, cheer him, offer him comfort, but what could she say? Werewolf politics were ruthless, rooted in a bloody past. Kill or be killed, rule or submit, that was the way of the pack. Witches had a certain flair for cold-heartedness, but weres had them beat by a mile.

She found it all hard to comprehend, raised as she'd been by a family that couldn't care less if she were half witch or half mortal but cherished her for who she was. That Roderick had reached adulthood in his pack spoke of a strength and determination far beyond any she could lay claim to, as well as a damage that tore at her heart. At that moment she would gladly have throttled Bernadette Chase, and do no harm be damned.

A London Werewolf in America

She waited. A half hour passed, and he didn't come in. She gave up and trudged up the stairs. There had to be something she could do for him to ease his tension and his mind. Other than the obvious, of course.

She double-checked the wards on his room and found them undisturbed. As far as she could tell, Big Alex's watchwolves hadn't entered the house. In her own room she reluctantly slipped out of the dress and hung it in the closet with infinite care. When would she wear it again? No matter, she'd come up with something. When you owned a dress like this, you found excuses to wear it. She should put it on and go into the shop, just to watch Peri's jaw drop.

As she tugged on a robe a prickle of premonition tightened the hairs on her forearms. She turned from the closet and went to the window just in time to catch a glimpse of movement near the flower beds. Not Roderick. Its coat was too light. One of the betas? She leaned across the sill for a closer look.

Clearly canine, the yellow beast prowled at the edge of the garden, watching the house. Her room, it seemed, in particular. Darinda's breath caught in her throat, and she pressed herself against the wall. Coyote? Had they gotten past Big Alex's guard already?

After the initial moment of alarm wore off she peered outside again, and relaxed. That was clearly a wolf down there. Too big and heavy for a coyote, its movements were decidedly wolfish. The golden coat was an anomaly among the predominantly gray weres but not unheard of.

Having reassured herself, she leaned against the sill and waved to the guard below. The wolf cast her what appeared to Darinda's eyes as a filthy look before it slunk off through the lilacs.

Darinda sniffed. Not every wolf would be as sanguine toward her presence as Big Alex. As long as they kept the coyotes away, she could tolerate a little ill will.

The front door opened, thumped shut. She heard Roderick's tread on the stairs. He paused for a moment outside her door, then moved on. He shut himself in his room. She listened to his fitful movements, more sound than a man simply undressing would make as he paced out his frustration inside his cage again.

Suddenly she knew how she could help him without betraying his betrothal to Coraline. She knew just the way to lift his mood and her own as well and clear out both their heads. Why hadn't she thought of this sooner? She dug out her cell and called Set A Spell. After a brief rummage through the storeroom, Peri assured her the items she needed did indeed exist. "I don't know how the Goths missed these," Peri said. "I'll set the magic on 'em tomorrow morning so it'll be nice and fresh. You need anything else? Condoms? Birth control? Flea and tick powder?"

"No, no, hold onto that last one, and you've got a one-track mind. How many times do I have to say this? It's not that kind of relationship. Even if I did sleep in his bed last night."

"You *what*?" Darinda had to yank the phone away from her ear. She wondered that the wolves in the yard didn't start howling. "Details! Details! I want details!"

"All in good time. I'll see you tomorrow. How's Norman?"

"Depressed. He melted his water bottle."

"Poor baby. Maybe I should bring him here."

Her door flew open. Roderick, still in his slacks but bare-chested, stared about the room. "I heard a shriek."

Darinda held up her phone. "Peri. She says hi. Oh, wait, no she doesn't. She says—Peri! That's disgusting!" Pixie laughter trilled out of the cell, followed by a click. Darinda set the phone on her nightstand. "We should set her up with Eugene. That'll fix her. Or Eugene. Never mind. I've got something to fix us. A surprise. You're gong to love it."

"Really," he said doubtfully.

"Yes. Really." Enough with the stress and the politicking. Sometimes you just had to get away.

Chapter 12

The day dawned lovely, with cloudless blue skies and a warm pleasant breeze, exactly right for what she had in mind. Darinda glanced over at Roderick and wished he would relax and appreciate it. Unfortunately, he was too busy throttling her car's door handle and trying not to snarl at the traffic whizzing by them. He winced openly when Darinda shot from lane to lane. "Far be it from me to instruct you in anything," he said tightly, "but shouldn't we be over there?"

"Not in America. We drive on this side over here. See, everybody's doing it, more or less."

"You're awfully chipper."

"I'm happy. You should be too. We needed this. We needed to get out of the city."

"You still haven't told me where we're going."

"I told you last night, it's a surprise."

His expression radiated wariness. "And that bag you needed to fetch from your shop? Is that a surprise as well?"

"It's part of it. Just settle back and enjoy the ride. It'll take us about an hour to get there."

"An hour." He eyed the flood of speeding cars and groaned aloud. "I should have just stood out in the yard and waited for the coyotes to find me."

"I know, the Schuylkill Expressway does take some getting used to. It won't be like this all the way. Trust me, you're going to love this."

His growled response came so softly she almost missed it. "I do trust you."

"I know." She spoke just as softly. "Nothing's going to happen to the house. Big Alex has it under control."

"What about us? Do you suppose he's got his wolves following us right now?"

She hadn't considered that and said so. "Somehow I doubt it. No offense, but I'd guess he's more concerned with driving off the coyotes than making sure you and I are safe."

"Just as well. I doubt even a leech could stick to you, the way you're weaving in and out."

"I thought you trusted me."

"Anywhere but behind the wheel of a car. I believe I've told you that already."

Darinda snorted. "You don't know your way around. You told me that, too. I'm your chauffeur for the duration. Grin and bear it."

He didn't grin but he bore it, albeit sullenly. Darinda darted around a truck, and he only flinched a little. They still had a long way to go. A distraction seemed in order. "What's the Registry? A social listing? You said something to Big Alex last night about Coraline being on some sort of Registry."

"Oh. That." He stared out at the cars. A bit too deliberately, Darinda thought. "It's not so much a social list as a...I'm not sure how you humans view this. It's a record of lineage. A chart of our bloodlines."

"You mean, like a pedigree? Like with dogs?" She shook her head. "You're right, I'm not sure what to think of that. It makes it sound like you were sent here to breed with a show dog or something."

"That's not far off the mark. The Registry was devised to help us keep our bloodlines straight, so we didn't mate with our cousins or that sort of thing. The bloodlines got frightfully tangled during the Dark Ages. Sisters mated to brothers, sons to mothers. All sorts of genetic problems popped up. A whole clan in Russia nearly went extinct from leukemia. The Registry helps us minimize that so we can breed healthy packs."

"Aren't you and the Duquesnes related, thought?"

"Distantly. We've common ancestors, but generations back. Mother's gone over the bloodlines with a microscope. Genetically we're safe. The marriage will strengthen both families."

Just the concept made her want to shudder. "So Coraline checks out, even though she's not listed?"

"Mother was concerned. So was I. But the Duquesnes passed every other criterion, and we've had dealings with them for decades. I find it hard to believe they'd abandon the Registry, though."

"Well, if she's healthy and you're genetically compatible, I don't see how it could matter." She glanced over and caught him glowering at her. "Oh, right, I forgot. You're English. Of course it matters."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Breeding. The whole class thing. We unwashed masses over here take a looser view. Land of the free and all that." She grinned. "It must be driving you nuts, stuck with a mutt like me."

He smiled back. "You have your charms." Darinda flashed around an SUV. Roderick's smile vanished. "Driving isn't one of them."

"You can always get out."

"It isn't that simple."

"Sure it is. I'll pull over to the shoulder."

"Not that." His tone was sharp enough to cut flesh. "Maybe you do things differently here in the land of the free, but in Europe we adhere to tradition. The selection of a suitable mate is vital because only the alphas breed. Only those who've proven themselves and have earned the right. It's up to us to ensure the health and continuation of the pack. And because we mate for life, we only get the one shot at it."

"Forgive my saying so, but that sounds awful."

"It leads to hard choices. Aunt Letty wanted pups. She could only get them by leaving the pack and Mother's authority. Charlie tells me the packs are more lax here. The betas and sometimes lowers get to breed, as long as they can support their pups."

"And you don't agree?"

"We always fared best with smaller, more manageable numbers. Easier to feed the young and conserve resources. Or need I point out what uncontrolled breeding has done to your species?"

"Only if you want to be kicked out of a moving car. Suppose you and the mate they picked out for you don't like each other?"

"It's not as if we have a wide selection. I just said our numbers are small, and the pool of alphas is smaller still. Sometimes it's a matter of take what you get. Coraline's comely enough. She's healthy, I assume she's intelligent, and her lineage is acceptable. As long as she cuts back on the perfume, I suppose we can make a go of it."

"How romantic."

"Ah, that's right. You want the fairy tale. The happy ending. So how do witches find their mates? Cast a spell or something?"

"Only the desperate ones do that. The rest of us..."

She trailed off. She'd never been called on to explain this before, and found the words hard to come by. "We're not really human, but not really part of the night. We're kind of in the middle. The magic sets us apart. Neither side fully trusts us, and both sides fear our power. It's why we tend to be solitary. Two witches together tends to devolve into a power struggle." Roderick nodded knowingly. What a lousy thing to have in common. "It doesn't help that I'm saddled with this whole honesty thing. I touch someone and I know what's foremost in their mind. I've learned to control it, but...have you ever wondered what your girlfriends were thinking?"

"Not really, no."

"Right. You're a guy. Well, I'm a girl, and let me tell you, my curiosity has wrecked more relationships than—well, never mind. The nightsiders all want to use me, and mortals, hah. Tell a guy you're a witch and you can wave bye-bye."

"Then how did your mother wind up married to one?"

"Mom had it easy. She's a precog. She knew everything would work out with Dad even before she met him. It probably helps that they can't read each other's minds. Plus Mom can foresee any problems." Darinda made a one-shouldered shrug. "Works for them."

"Obviously. You appear to have turned out all right. So what am I thinking?" he asked.

"The same thing you've been thinking since we met. How you want to get me into bed. You hide it better sometimes than others, but it's always boiling just below the surface."

"You're an attractive, courageous and resourceful she, worthy of an alpha. Any male who doesn't want you is probably neutered."

"I guess that's a compliment. Y'know, you're pretty refreshing. Raw instinct and open honesty. I know exactly where I stand with you. I almost wish..." She cut herself off. Too much honesty could be as disastrous as too little, as her entire life had proven to her. "Forget it. It would never work." "We'll never know unless we try."

"We're not going to try. Are you that sure you won't be happy with Coraline?"

He was silent for so long she wondered if she'd insulted him. Finally he spoke. "You needn't be concerned about my happiness. We weres have what you'd call a survival mechanism. When an alpha pair mates, they bond. Scent to scent, body to body, mind to mind. It allows the alpha pair to act as one in the ruling and protection of the pack. It only works between weres, not with other species. Coraline and I will be united in more than matrimony. I suppose love will come eventually. Isn't that what you predicted?"

"I did?"

"My reading. The cards. You promised me true love and happiness. Don't tell me that was all a sham."

The cards, right. The King of Spades and the Queen of Hearts. "Of course not," she said. "The cards never lie."

"All right, then," he said, and grabbed at the handle with both hands as Darinda swept around a bus. "This drive's taking bloody forever. Are we there yet?"

Traffic thinned out as they approached King of Prussia, and dropped further still beyond the turnpike. Roderick took note of the exit she turned down, and groaned. "Valley Forge? Have I mentioned Colonial history isn't one of my interests?"

"You've mentioned hunting. This is a national park. No gunning allowed. It's overrun with deer. They'll be bedded down at this time of day, but if you're as good as you claim you are you ought to be able to scare one up. Just don't tell me if you kill it. I don't want to know."

"Deer?" He perked up immediately. "You *do* know what's on a man's mind." He shot a sudden, suspicious glance at the bag on the back seat. "You'd better not have a leash in there."

"Um," she said, and refused further comment.

As more trees and open space appeared by the highway, Roderick's anxieties unknotted, replaced by a growing excitement. Darinda headed for the parking area below the Welcome Center and found a spot close to the restrooms. As she parked, she counted cars. Not jammed, like it would be on

a weekend in this weather, but still pretty well populated. They'd have to be careful.

Roderick unhooked himself and ducked out of the car before she got her seat belt unfastened. He stood by the Toyota, nose in the air, quivering, eyes alight. The wolf had awakened and was seconds away from putting in an appearance. "Behind the restrooms," Darinda said. "Make sure nobody's around. And please try not to rip your clothes. I'm not driving you home naked."

He hurried toward the fieldstone building. "Give me some credit," he snapped back over his shoulder. His voice was ragged. Was that hair on the backs of his hands?

"Wait." Darinda reached into the bag from Set A Spell. She held up a collar, a wide band of red leather studded with crystals. "Put this on."

He stopped dead and bared his teeth at her. "Out of the question."

"It's not a fashion statement." She lifted her wrist to show him the bracelet that clasped it, a miniature version of the collar. "It's a tracking device. The crystals resonate with each other. It'll tell me exactly where you are at all times. If you run into trouble, I'll know it."

He eyed the collar, unconvinced. "Not to mention it makes a perfect disguise," she went on. "People see you running loose, they'll think 'wolf' and panic. They see you with a collar on, they'll think 'dog' and go about their business."

"I don't see any difference."

"I do. I see the difference between me getting a lecture on leash laws and you getting shot by a park ranger. You hired me to keep you safe, and I'm going to do that any way possible, whether you like my methods or not. Now buckle up, or we go home right now."

His glower said it all. But he stomped back to her and snatched the collar from her hand and took it with him behind the restrooms. Darinda leaned against the trunk of her car and sighed. The witch's manual had never covered this.

The sound of a car brought her head around. A rusty Chevy rolled into the parking lot with a bunch of kids inside. Teenagers, ditching school. Three boys and two girls piled noisily out of the car, all sandy hair and long limbs, ecstatic to be outside and loose on the world. They pelted at once for the low guardrail that ringed the parking area, hurtled it and disappeared. Darinda turned her attention back to the restrooms.

Presently Roderick reappeared, this time on four legs. He was wearing the collar and an angry expression. "Get over it," she told him. He growled, but his heart wasn't in it. The woods were too close and inviting. His tail came up and waved. Suddenly he bounced up on his hind legs and slurped his tongue across her cheek. Before she could react he dropped and raced for the far end of the lot. He vaulted the fence as eagerly as the teens had, without so much as a backward glance.

Darinda scrubbed slobber off her cheek. Damn wet werewolf kisses. "Have a blast," she muttered. She rinsed her face in the ladies' room, then went behind the building to gather up his clothes. These she folded them neatly on the back seat. The thin vibration on her wrist told her he was headed north at top speed. She chuckled in spite of herself and looked around for an entrance to a hiking trail.

* * * *

Darinda wasn't about to go jumping fences, so she left the parking area by a side exit and strolled along the road it led her to. Not far along she came across a wide, gated track marked by an *Authorized Vehicles Only* sign. The tingle from her bracelet announced Roderick was running in a northeasterly direction, and the track seemed to aim that way. She left the road and turned up the track. Best to keep herself in his vicinity, just in case she was needed.

Within ten minutes she spotted three does, one with an early fawn. The deer seemed more curious than alarmed by her presence. They stared at her briefly, then moved on, unhurried, when she showed no inclination to attack them. She hoped Roderick would have equally good fortune, though without any fawns involved.

The track wound uphill. She climbed at a slow, easy pace. She found it difficult to walk steadily. Impressions from the wolf kept intruding on her consciousness. Roderick's intellect didn't change with his form, but emotions heightened and instinct roared to the fore. Witches were also beings of instinct and emotion. This included Darinda, in spite of her cool, controlled façade. If she didn't watch herself, she might get sucked under by the riptide of sensations streaming into her through their link.

Just imagine what sex with him would be like. No, on second thought, better not.

Because the link distracted her, she didn't even realize she'd caught up to the teens until she rounded a curve in the track and stumbled into the midst of them. Quite the embarrassing midst, too, as they'd wasted no time in shedding their clothes. Two of the boys and one of the girls were practically naked already.

They stared at each other for a long, awkward moment before Darinda averted her eyes. "Sorry, kids," she mumbled, and hastily moved on. "Go about your business."

"Hey, what's your hurry?" The boy still mostly dressed thrust himself into her path. "Stick around. The fun's just starting."

"Not my kind of fun. Anyway, I think I'm a little old for you."

She tried to duck around him, but he kept jumping in front of her. That grin of his creeped her out. She lifted her hand slightly. Just tangle up his legs and be on her way, no biggie.

Until she saw the charm around his neck, and sensed the magic on it. She glanced at the others and discovered they all wore similar charms, and similar grins. It struck her how alike they all looked, like members of the same family. Or pack. Right down to the yellow eyes.

"Nice of you to stop by," the naked girl said. "Saves us the trouble of hunting you down."

The girl shifted form in a quick, smooth blur, becoming coyote between one breath and the next. One by one her kin joined her. The last boy was still wriggling out of his jeans. "Don't worry about your teabag buddy," he said. "We'll get to him in a minute."

A minute ought to be just time enough. She shoved at him with her air spell. He staggered, but was not hurled aside as she expected. She whirled to block the advance of the rest of the pack. They hit the wall of solid air, poked and prodded at it, grinned coyote grins at her, and kept coming.

"I see you're catching on," the still-human boy said as consternation dawned on her face. "Don't bother with your magic, because it won't work. Not with us." But a fist would, and did, when delivered with all Darinda's force into the coyote boy's nose. "Do no harm" did not preclude self-defense, and growing up with a feisty brother had its advantages. He lurched backward. She kicked his legs out from under him and got three long strides worth of head start before the pack leaped after her.

Okay, now what? She'd never outrun them. She flashed her frantic gaze across the trees while she ran, searching for a branch low enough to swing up onto. She spotted a break up ahead. If she could get into the open, someone might see her. If only she knew a flight spell. Where was Peri's pixie dust when you really needed it?

And Roderick. If the coyotes got her, what would happen to Roderick?

She'd almost reached the end of the track when the coyote girls hit her from behind, one on her back, one against her legs. Darinda went down in the dirt. The pack swarmed over her. She thickened the air around her into a shield. It slowed but didn't stop them. The charms that hung from their furry necks negated her defenses. How? Only Peri and Paul knew her personal signature.

One of the boys sat on her chest. The others ringed around. Abruptly the whole bunch blurred back to human. The boy pinned her arms to the earth. He glared down at her. His nose was bleeding. "No biting," he ordered his pack. "This has to look like a human did it. Who brought the knife?"

Silence. Toes dug into the dirt, gazes slid aside. "C'mon," the boy said, "didn't anybody bring the knife?"

"You're in charge, you should've—"

"I thought Mimi—"

"And how am I supposed to hold it? It's silver, you fuzzhead. I'm not carrying that in my mouth."

The boy on her chest snarled a curse. "You didn't think this through very well, did you?" Darinda said. "How about you let me go? We can do it again another time, when you're better prepared. At least tell me why you want Roderick dead. Or me, for that matter."

"Witchy, we don't give a hump for either of you. We just do what we're paid for. C'mon," he said to his cohorts, "*somebody* has to have some ideas here."

The pack looked at each other. "Drown her?" another boy suggested.

"Yeah," his brother piped up hopefully. "There's a river maybe a mile, two miles from here."

"Next to a road and a hiking trail, where any passing monkey could see us," Darinda's captor said. "That'd go over real big with the primate police. C'mon, who's got a brain here? Anybody?"

Darinda had a good idea and her breath back. She used it in the banshee scream. The boy was knocked right off her chest. The others reeled back, hands clapped to their ears, adding their shrieks to hers. None went down, like they were supposed to, or fell unconscious, as she'd hoped. She'd have to settle for stunned.

She scrambled up and made a desperate dash for the break. A field lay beyond. The top of the Washington Memorial Chapel towered over the trees, marking the site of Route 23 and the walking path, with its bikers and joggers and drivers with cell phones who would see her and come to her aid. As she ran she thought at Roderick, *Stay way, stay away*—

She'd almost reached the break when a coyote tripped her up. It jumped on top of her and snarled in her face. The charm it wore swung before her eyes, a quarter-sized amulet on a brass chain. A thread of dark crimson hair had been braided through the chain.

Hair. Great Goddess. Her mind leaped back to Kelly Drive and the attacking were's jaws in her hair. He must have gotten strands of it tangled in his teeth. Any halfway-talented witch could whip up individualized counterspells with something as personal as hair.

They could kill her, and her magic wouldn't stop them.

But it was worth a try.

She opened her mouth for another scream. The coyote rammed its paw into her mouth. She bit down as hard as she could. The were yanked its paw free and rolled away, with a series of alternating yelps and crude coyote curses.

Small victory. The rest of the pack swarmed over her. Stall them, she thought desperately. Surely someone had heard her. Banshee screams carried for miles.

One of the coyote girls had gone human to suck on her bitten hand. Suddenly she brightened. "Hey. Hey! I got an idea." The girl turned coyote again. She hopped on top of Darinda and thrust her hindquarters against Darinda's face. Darinda's mouth and nose filled with coyote fur, pressing down on her like a shaggy rug, cutting off her air.

"Hold her down!" the boy she'd punched shouted. The whole pack fell on her, pinning her limbs with hands and paws and bodies in both forms.

Darinda thrashed and shoved and flailed but they had her outnumbered and outmuscled. She tried to bite. The coyote only pressed down harder. No air at all seeped in by now. The world went gray around the edges.

She was going to die, smothered by coyote fur, and there was nothing she could do about it.

* * * *

Darinda hadn't misled him. These woods stank of deer. Roderick literally stumbled over a buck bedded down inside a thicket. Fat and complacent in a world of no predators, it flicked its ears and blinked at him before his scent identified him and its atrophied instincts reminded it wolves were a threat. It sprang up and bounded away. Roderick leaped in pursuit.

Fat and complacent it might be, but it was also fast as all hell. It led him on a zigzag chase through the trees, out of the trees and across a segment of field, then back into the woods again. Roderick raced doggedly after it. Twice he got close enough to snap at its haunches and had to dodge flying rear hooves.

Lycaon love it, how he'd missed this! The hunt, the chase, the promise of a fresh, steaming kill. This was what made being a were the most wonderful thing in the world.

He had no intention of bringing it down. It would take a pack for that. That didn't mean he couldn't indulge in a spot of fun.

The buck put on a burst of speed and left him in its dust. He slowed to a lope, then a trot, then at last to a stop, panting heavily. Bugger, he was out of shape. Lucky his kind didn't have to feed themselves on their own kills any more. He'd be scrawny as one of those bloody coyotes if he had to rely on that.

A couple of hikers spotted him and pointed. The girl went, "Here, boy," and made kissy noises. Roderick trotted into the trees.

Back in the woods he scared up a rabbit. He lunged for it. His jaws closed over its spine and snapped shut before his brain caught up with the action. Hot blood and vital juices gushed into his mouth. For a moment he became pure wolf, master of the forest, bane of the weak, reveling in the kill.

Only for a moment. He sat and stared at the dead bunny lying between his forepaws. Now what? He wasn't even hungry. All that pasta last night. Instinct had got the better of him. Bloody wasteful. Where would the wolffolk be if they went around killing everything just because they could?

He could, he supposed, take it back to Darinda. Lay it at her feet like a good were provider. Proof of his mighty male prowess. And what would she do with it? She was an herbivore, for pity's sake. In a day and age long past, she would have been prey.

He snorted at the thought. Not Darinda. Even with the vegetable reek wafting off her, she still didn't smell like prey. She didn't smell like any she he'd ever dallied with. She smelled, were he to admit the truth to himself, downright delicious. Absolutely right.

It had to be the magic in her. That same magic had drawn him across an airport terminal to gaze into her eyes. He found their non-were blue fascinating. They could go sky-rich with joy or roiling and dark with annoyance, like the sea in a storm. He liked to provoke the annoyance. Her true spirit showed then, the wolf that lurked beneath the witch, that met and matched his own so perfectly.

Perhaps that was why he insisted on behaving like such an absolute git in her presence.

Irritated, he scratched at his neck, at the collar. Lycaon, would you look at him. Collared like a dog. Because she said wear it. Because he trusted her, as he trusted no wolf, and wanted her, as he wanted no other. When had all that happened?

And what was up with the thing? It burned against his skin. Burned like terror.

A scream blasted across the landscape, loud as a siren in spite of the distance. Roderick's ears stiffened. He knew the scream and the voice inside it. He'd been standing right next to her when she'd loosed it last. His ears had rung for nearly an hour.

Darinda. She was in danger, fleeing and afraid for her life.

The collar told him her location and precisely where she was headed. He was on his feet and running before the thought ended, faster than he'd run after the deer, this time with killing in his heart.

* * * *

Darinda beat feebly against the flank of the coyote on her face. Only snatches of air reached her straining lungs, and those tasted hot and musty. The world grew darker with each labored breath. She strained to think of a way out of this. She had to strain to think at all.

All at once the coyote was gone. All of them were gone. She gasped, sucked in huge gulps of precious air, and hacked and spit coarse hairs out of her mouth. The rushing in her ears gave way to yips and yelps and the roar of some furious beast wreaking determined havoc.

She forced herself up on her elbows. The pack had dropped from five to three. As she watched, another abandoned its fellows and ran for its life, driven off by the huge black wolf whose powerful muscles and flashing fangs seemed to be everywhere at once.

Something shiny hit the ground and bounced to a stop near her arm. Darinda's dazed brain finally identified it as one of their spellbusting charms. The charm's owner screamed. Darinda smelled blood in the air.

The coyote abruptly went human. Blood streamed from a bite on his arm. He aimed a kick at Roderick's muzzle, then leaped clean over Darinda and plunged through the break in the trees.

That left the last coyote. It lay on the ground in classic canine submission posture, belly up and whimpering. The wolf stood over it and growled. Then he went up on his hind legs and blurred. Roderick dug his fingers into the coyote's ruff, not gently, and hauled it up. Its legs dangled over the track. He ripped the charm from the were's neck and flung it into the brush.

"Now, bitch," he snarled, "let's have a chat."

The coyote writhed in his grip. It snapped at his hands. When neither worked, it tried whining. When that didn't work either, it shifted form. The naked girl beamed up at him and batted her lashes. "You wouldn't hit a girl, would you?" she simpered.

"Hit you? Of course not." He closed his hand around her throat and squeezed. The coyote girl gurgled and started thrashing again. "On the other hand, I've no qualms about snapping your neck. Now, why are you trying to kill us?"

Her eyes bugged. Her face was turning purple. She tore at his hand with her nails. Roderick eased up without letting her go. She hauled in a breath and wheezed it out. "Paid."

"Paid? To kill us?" The girl nodded frantically. "By whom?"

"Dunno." Roderick started to squeeze. "I don't! I don't! We got your names and a wad of cash. That's it."

"From whom? Who's your alpha? Your pack leader?"

She grimaced. "We don't have leaders. Pack leaders are agents of the oppression." She spotted his collar, and her grimace grew teeth. "Only dogs have pack leaders."

Roderick brutally closed his hand. "Perhaps I'll take off your nose. Or a few of your fingers. Will that be oppressive enough?"

The coyote girl yelped something. "I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

"Alfie. It's Alfie. He makes the deals. Some relative of his wants the wolves dead. I dunno why. Nobody knows. But he's paying good money for it."

By now Darinda had regained her feet. It scared her how long that action seemed to take, and how her legs trembled as if all the strength had spilled out of them. But she made herself walk the three steps to Roderick and his captive, and she made the steps look steady. The coyote girl tried to cringe away from her, but couldn't avoid the hand Darinda placed on her forehead.

"She's telling the truth," Darinda said shortly. "What she said is all she knows."

"Yeah, yeah. It's Alfie. He pays us. I dunno who he gets the money from. Hey, it's a living." She whined placatingly. "No hard feelings, huh?"

"Well, I'm all for killing her," Roderick said. "I suppose that goes against your witchy principles?"

Reluctantly, Darinda nodded. "You're just lucky," she told the coyote, "you aren't the one who had her butt on my face."

Roderick thrust the girl away. She hit the ground, rolled, and came up coyote. She dove through the brush and disappeared.

A London Werewolf in America

Scarcely had the noise of the coyote's flight faded than another ruckus started up, this time from across the field. "Our other little friend must have found someone," Roderick said. "The bastard's probably telling them all about the people who attacked him in the woods. Time to go."

He scooped her up in his arms and set off at a ground-eating trot. At first Darinda was too surprised to speak. What did he think she was, some fainting fairytale maiden? She pushed feebly at his chest. "Put me down."

"No."

"Put me down. I can walk."

"I don't care. You're not going to. Now stop wriggling, or must I bite?"

"Asshole," she muttered, but stopped struggling. Her muscles seemed to go limp of their own volition, and she let her head rest against his chest. His skin was hot and sweaty from fighting for her life. She could hear his heartbeat, a steady, powerful, comforting thump, barely elevated in spite of his exertions. Weres, she'd heard, were stronger than humans. His arms were certainly strong enough. She felt feather-light within their cradle. He didn't seem to notice, or mind, her weight at all.

In a shockingly short time they reached the parking lot. No sign of the coyotes or their car. There were humans around, though, and these stared and pointed. Darinda couldn't blame them. A muscular naked man in a collar carrying a bedraggled woman in his arms wasn't exactly an everyday sight in family-friendly Valley Forge National Historical Park. Roderick's snarl kept them at bay long enough to reach Darinda's car. He set her down gently. "Give me the keys."

"Nothing doing. I can drive."

With a rough growl he put his hand on her head and forced her eyes level with the side-view mirror. Blessed Goddess. Her face had gone pasty as bread dough and sported a number of scratches. Her lips seemed to hold no blood at all. Her enormous eyes looked nearly black in the pallid mask of her face. They were glazed with shock. Her hair stuck out in a dozen directions and had twigs in it.

"Give me the keys," Roderick repeated.

This time she didn't argue. She fumbled them out of her pocket and handed them over. He settled her on the front passenger seat. "Where are my clothes?"

"Back seat."

He paused only long enough to rip off the collar and fling it to the floor of the car. He yanked on his trousers and shirt without bothering to fasten either and skipped his shoes altogether. He did take his time in tucking his jacket around her shoulders. His tender touch belied the grimness in his eyes.

By now reaction had set in. She clutched his jacket tight, but couldn't stop her shivering. "Please don't faint," Roderick said. "I'm not sure I know the way back from here."

"The trunk," she chattered. "I packed a lunch. There's herbal iced tea. Maybe it'll help."

It didn't, but it gave her shaking fingers something to fasten on. Her hands were colder than the bottle. Roderick got behind the wheel and spat gravel getting them out of the lot, just as a park security vehicle headed in. "Close," he murmured, "but we've made it. You're not hurt? No bites? No open wounds?"

"I'm fine."

She could tell he didn't buy it, but he didn't press the matter. "Of course you are. How do I get out of here?"

She guided him back to the highway. "How did they find us?" she kept repeating. "How did they know? I didn't tell anyone where we were going, not even Peri."

"They couldn't have followed us," Roderick said. "Not the way you drive."

"Thanks for nothing." Her head swiveled constantly, watching traffic. One of those other cars could hold the enemy. Which? What kind of car had the pack been driving? What color? It scared her that she couldn't remember. Concerned with easing Roderick's stress, she hadn't been paying attention.

She moaned and lowered her head to her hands. "I am the worst bodyguard on the face of the planet."

"It doesn't matter. We're safe now. I won't allow anything to happen to you."

He took her hand. Just a simple clasp and squeeze, but everything he was feeling poured into her through the contact. A rage so murderous she tasted the hunger to rend coyote flesh on her own tongue. A concern for her so profound it shook her to the core, and possessiveness that did likewise. A trust unshaken by her failures and mistakes. The lust remained, but was overwhelmed by a growing emotion she was too afraid to put a name to.

She should yank her hand away, break the contact, stop the flow, save herself. Her head knew this. Her heart wrapped itself in his caring, as her hand wrapped itself around his.

Roderick himself let go, in order to put his hand back on the wheel and send the Toyota careening around a Volkswagen. "Bloody monkey drivers," he muttered.

Darinda gave him her first full smile since the attack. "You should talk." "You should be in hospital."

"I'll be okay. Really." Her shivers had gone inward, and had nothing to do with the coyote incident. "Just get us back to Meadowlands."

Chapter 13

They made it home in record time and in one piece. Roderick made only one wrong turn, down the wrong way on Girard Avenue into West Fairmount Park. Darinda didn't want to be reminded of the Duquesnes just now. She got them turned around and back to the Meadows side of the Schuylkill.

Two of Big Alex's guards lounged in the yard. Their ears pricked when Roderick got out of the car, but they didn't rise to their feet until Darinda emerged. They lowered their heads and started forward. Roderick's sharp bark warned them off. He hustled Darinda into the house and locked the door behind them.

Inside he tried to pick her up again. This time she resisted. "I'm not an invalid," she snapped. "I'm just a little shaky. Who wouldn't be? That bitch tried to smother me with her butt."

Roderick let her go. "If you say so. Just a word of warning. Your scent's reeking like a sick herbivore's. Those two outside almost made a run at you. You'd better stay indoors until it's back to normal. For your own safety."

Again with the werewolf instinctual predator crap. "And what about you? Do you want to take a shot at me too?"

"Is that an invitation?"

"Oh, leave me alone." She thrust him away and stomped up the stairs. By the time she reached the upstairs hall she was practically running. She slammed into the bathroom, tore off her clothes, flung them into the corner and climbed into the shower.

The water helped. It blasted her skin and melted the chilly lump inside her. It rinsed the stink of coyote off her flesh. Best of all, it sluiced away the worst of her humiliation. She turned her face up to the spray and let it wash away the tears that burned her eyes even hotter than the water. She was a witch, Hecate damn it. Powerful. Strong. Self-reliant. Dependent on no man or woman. Yet a bunch of coyote teenagers had flicked aside her defenses and come within a heartbeat of killing her. Her magic, the foundation of her strength and confidence, had failed her. If not for Roderick...

She shut off the water and stood dripping. This time she shivered with an anger that would do a werewolf proud. Enough with the victim thinking. Whoever had ordered these attacks would face the wrath of the witch.

Darinda didn't step out of the shower until she was certain she had herself at least outwardly under control again. Her clothes remained in a heap in the corner. She couldn't bring herself to touch them, not with the rips and the musky stench and the wiry buff-and-gray coyote hairs all over them. She selected a towel instead, wrapped it about her and reached for the knob.

Roderick stood right outside the door.

Darinda hopped back a step. "I wish you'd stop doing that."

"I thought you could use this." He handed her a fluffy blue bathrobe. "It smells like it was Lorraine's."

Lorraine must be a roomy girl. The robe, which fell to Darinda's shins, practically swallowed her. "Lorraine's the married one, right? From New Jersey? And she still has clothing here? Doesn't your aunt ever throw anything out?"

"Rarely," Roderick confirmed. "No telling when a pup will pop in for a stay. Aunt Letty likes to be prepared. Good luck for the both of us, eh?" He'd changed his clothes to another of Charlie's plaid-shirt-and-tight-jeans combos. He cast a dismissive look at the remains of her outfit. "I'll see those get a proper burial. Or cremation, if you prefer."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have snapped at you. I was—I was oh hell. I should have been more alert. I shouldn't have to be rescued. I thought I was stronger than this."

"It does leave a bitter taste in one's mouth." He pressed closer to her side, but gingerly. Even without contact, she felt his dilemma, torn between his obvious need to comfort her and his awareness of her no-touch policy. "We all think we're more capable than we turn out to be. Welcome to the club." Crap. Here she stood whining over her shortcomings while he'd had his alpha pride battered for days, helpless to the point of having to depend on a witch to save his hide. To hell with it. She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him close. His surprise lasted barely a second before he responded to her embrace, returning warmth for warmth.

She wasn't indestructible. He wasn't in control. But together they could be stronger than either was alone. Together they could see each other through this.

"Green," she said abruptly. "They had a green car. I don't remember the make. I just wish I knew how they found us."

"I think I can answer that."

He dug in his pocket and came up with a small, milky crystal, which he handed to her. She blinked at it, missing the connection. "Did this come off your collar?"

"No, it came off your car. I wondered myself how they followed us, so I talked to Big Alex's boys. I figured they'd have more experience in this sort of thing. They found it fixed to your car's undercarriage. What did you call it? A tracking device?"

Darinda let the crystal warm in her palm then closed her fingers over it. It carried a definite vibe of directional magic, like a mystic GPS. All this time she'd been so careful to ward and sweep the house. Checking her own car for bugs had never occurred to her. Her arrogance had nearly cost them both.

"They also found and ate your picnic lunch," Roderick added. "I'm sorry. I'm sure it was delicious."

"Screw the lunch." She hurled the crystal into the toilet. Let the coyotes track *that.* "I've had it with this being hunted crap. I want to hunt for a change."

"Now you're thinking like a wolf." He clasped her to him in a rough were hug. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

His words brought back all her misgivings. His feelings for her were becoming more powerful, harder to resist. Worse yet, hers had begun to echo them, and that just couldn't be.

She had to put an end to this. In just another minute. She pressed her cheek against his shirt. His scent had already supplanted Charlie's on the fabric. How long before it did the same to her own? Alphas demanded submission from their followers, and witches didn't do submission at all.

Gently but determinedly she loosened her hold and eased herself out of his embrace. "Have you called Coraline? She must have heard about this by now. I'm sure she'll want to know that you're all right."

"Coraline?" He cocked his head at her, puzzled. "What's she got to do with this?"

"She's your future wife. Have you even spoken to her since the dinner party?"

"We're getting married in roughly five days. We'll have the rest of our lives to talk to each other. Why are you so concerned with her all of a sudden?"

"It seems to me one of us should be, and I shouldn't be the one. I'm only here to look out for your safety."

"Is this some kind of human thing? That monthly heat cycle I've heard about?"

"No. It's me getting back on track so you can stop looking over your shoulder." She made her voice brisk, businessy. Never mind that her insides were shriveling up. She needed to look at something other than him, so she picked the toilet. It made a nice metaphor for her current emotional turmoil. "I don't think I would have gotten anything from that crystal anyway. They've made a point of keeping their magic untraceable. Maybe they left some other clue on the car. I should talk to our guards. How's my scent?"

"Confusing," Roderick growled, "but unmistakably blunt. Perhaps I will make a call or two. Good luck with your hunt." He stormed off down the hall.

Darinda hugged the oversized robe to her body and willed it to still her inner trembling. "Yeah," she muttered to herself. "Good luck with that."

* * * *

Darinda spoke briefly with the wolves outside. Her Toyota was officially a dead end as far as leads were concerned. If there'd been anything else on her car, even a hair or a whiff of odor, they would have found it and reported it. Big Alex's employees were nothing if not thorough. If she and Roderick were to survive these assaults, she would have to become the same.

She spent the rest of the afternoon warding her room. For a long time she stared at the vial of dark yellow powder. The nerve-searing ward was a definite harm-doer. Why not? They'd tried to kill her. They'd tried to kill Roderick more than once. The rage that welled up at the second thought far surpassed that for the first. That realization cleared her mind in a snap. What was she thinking? That was the witch's injured pride talking. Those dark thoughts veered too far from the light. She'd been hanging around wolves too much.

In the end she picked the simple shock/alarm. It wouldn't keep out a determined assailant, but it would make them think twice. While she was treating the windowsills she looked out and noticed the yellow wolf prowling around the garden again. She hadn't seen it when she'd gone out to talk to the other two. It probably didn't care for humans much.

"The feeling's mutual," Darinda muttered. "At least, as far as your coyote cousins are concerned."

Wait. Wait just a second. Witches might be solitary by nature, but that didn't make them total loners. Just because Darinda didn't belong to a coven didn't mean she had no connections. She knew plenty of witches and their covens, and so did Peri. Those witches would know other witches. They might even know the witch who'd been supplying the coyotes with magic.

She rushed through the completion of her ward spell then hopped onto the bed with her cell phone and started dialing. Peri first. She was the social one. "About time you let me in on this," Peri said once Darinda explained. "I love detective stuff."

"Maybe you should be up here instead of me. I'm sucking pretty bad."

Peri giggled nastily. "Does the sucking have anything to do with the night you spent with the wolf?"

"For a pixie you've got a filthy mind. He stayed in his wolf form. Nothing happened. Really, as far as the bodyguard stint I'm not doing so hot."

"Hey, he's not dead, is he? Then you're doing fine. Seriously, Dar. I'll be there in a second if you need me. I'd be there already if I thought I had a chance with the wolf. I don't, so there we are. You want me to call who now?" "Anyone we know who does basic spells and has werecoyotes for customers. Light magic, not dark. Everything I've run into so far has been run of the mill. They might—" The notion hit her like a lightning bolt. "The coyotes might be using more than one witch. Switching off so the magic can't be traced and no one catches on. No light witch would do anyone deliberate harm." She thought of her hair braided into the charms, and shivered.

"Whoa, that's good. I thought you said you weren't a detective."

"No, I said I wasn't a bodyguard. How do you know you don't have a chance with Roderick? He'd jump anything female."

"Because I shook his hand. He isn't meant for me. He's meant for somebody as pigheaded, opinionated and stuffed full of their own ego as he is."

"Hmmm. That could be Coraline. I don't really know her, but—"

"Who's Coraline?" She could almost hear Peri's shrug over the phone. "Oh well, you'll work it out eventually. I'll start making calls. I'll have June call too when she comes in. Maybe it'll keep her from breaking stuff."

After Peri hung up Darinda called every witch listed in the address book she carried at the bottom of her bag. Most lived in Philadelphia, but she also had the number for June's coven in Camden. The coyotes used Jersey muscle, why not a Jersey witch? Two of the addresses were located in Germantown. Might as well look into the dark magic angle, to keep all bases covered.

She'd just wrapped up her eighth fruitless call when she became aware of a ruckus downstairs—shouts, interspersed with snarls and harsh barking. Darinda slipped off the bed and cautiously tiptoed to the door to open it a crack. From the sound of things somebody was ripping someone a new one, and from the voice she determined the ripper was Roderick.

The same curiosity that had wrecked too many of her relationships urged her out of her room and down the stairs. She winced at a particularly vicious oath and felt a twinge of pity for whoever had been on the receiving end.

To her surprise, she found the parlor empty. The snarls ended on a roar with teeth in it. That was followed by the crack of a phone being slammed into its cradle hard enough to break both. Roderick practically lunged out of the kitchen. He'd nearly reached the door before he noticed her. He skidded to a stop. The look on his face made her recoil. Hair sprouted tentatively on his face and the backs of his hands.

He pulled back his lips, showing fangs. "Heard that, did you?" "Um—"

"Mother." His tone opened and closed the subject with that single word. "I also called the Dusquesnes. Coraline wasn't in, but I left a message. I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that."

"Are you all right? Is there anything I can do?"

"Not at the moment. You've done quite enough." He yanked the door open but paused at the threshold. She could see his nose working. "You're frightened."

"Surprised. Worried, maybe. Not frightened."

"You're frightened of me." He straightened, rising from wolf-crouch to man-upright. The stubble on his cheeks and hands receded. "Do I truly look that horrible?"

Darinda nodded. "It's a little disturbing."

"Talking to Mother always brings out the worst in me." He let the door fall shut. "I don't ever want you to fear me, not for any reason."

"Roderick, it's okay. I see a lot worse than you on a nightly basis."

"But you don't see it from me. And you won't, not ever again. You must be hungry. Let me fix you something."

"I can get it."

"My house, my prerogative. Besides, you made lunch, even if we didn't get to eat it."

As usual, she found it easier to acquiesce than to argue with him. "This is your aunt's house, you know," she reminded him.

"True, but she isn't here and I am." He seated her at the kitchen table then dug out a container of oatmeal. "I'm not very good at non-meat dishes. Wish me luck."

Darinda grinned, for the first time since the morning. It felt wonderful. "It's hard to wreck oatmeal."

"Precisely."

Darinda got a knife out of one of the drawers and peeled an apple from the fruit bowl. She'd meant for it to top her oatmeal, but the kitchen smells reminded her she hadn't eaten since breakfast—nearly ten hours ago, she saw with some shock by the clock on the wall. By the time Roderick spooned up her cereal, she'd already eaten the fruit. He passed on the oatmeal, attacking instead a plate of raw venison. The term "attack" was no exaggeration. Darinda shifted her chair so she could more easily look elsewhere. If only she could shift her ears.

"I made some calls," she said, and explained her theory about the coyotes using multiple witches. "I came up empty, but the witches I talked to said they'd ask around. Peri knows more people than I do. Maybe she'll find out something."

"If you find your witch, will she betray a customer?"

"She won't stand by while her magics are used to attack another witch. We may not run in packs, but we watch out for each other."

"That sounds precisely like a pack. But then," he added ruefully, "my pack's rather fallen down on the job of late."

"I was hoping you wouldn't bring that up." Darinda made a face at her oatmeal. "If you don't mind my asking..." she began cautiously.

"Did I accuse Mother outright of trying to kill me? No. We had other things to argue about. The subject didn't come up. Not that she'd ever admit anything. She always plays her cards close to the vest."

Cards. He had to mention cards. The cards had told her too many things currently in danger of coming true.

Fortunately the phone interrupted further conversation. Roderick got up to answer it. Darinda noticed he'd already emptied his plate. "Yes?" he said, and listened. He turned to her and mouthed "Charlie."

Darinda finished her oatmeal while Roderick spoke with his cousin. He hung up and she set the bowl aside at the same moment. "Please tell me good news," she said.

"I called him earlier. Everyone's fine. No incidents, no tracking devices on any of their vehicles. He'd appreciate any details you can give him."

"They had a green car, and charms specifically designed to counter my personal magic. That's all I remember."

"The car was probably stolen anyway. I doubt we'd get far there. Did you pick up one of the charms?"

The sudden heavy feeling in her stomach had nothing to do with oatmeal. "Oh no. Oh crap. I didn't even think of that." She slapped her palm against her forehead. "What is the matter with me?"

"Understandable, given the circumstances. You were upset."

"Upset' is hardly the word for it. Dammit, you could have been killed." "I could have been...?"

Crap and a half with a cherry on top. She glared at an innocent speck of oats in the bottom of her bowl. "You know what I mean."

To her surprise, he laughed. "Spoken like an excellent bodyguard. You go right on doing what you're doing. It's clearly getting results. They're coming for both of us now. We've got them worried. Worried hunters get careless. That's the moment they become prey."

"Like me this morning."

"You had no way of knowing they could counter your spells. The next time they attack, we'll be the ones prepared. Catch the bastards napping, eh?" Goddess help her, he actually sounded *eager*. "I'm going to have one last chat with our...'muscle,' I believe is the term." He held out his hand. "Come with me?"

"No, thanks, I've stared at enough canine faces today. Tell the yellow one to stop glaring at my window. It's getting on my nerves."

"Yellow?" He frowned, shrugged, and went out through the kitchen door. Darinda cleared the table and rinsed the dishes while she pondered their next move.

Preparedness would help, no question, but how could they prepare? Too many unknowns riddled this case. Hard to hunt when the quarry knew more about you than vice versa.

Finally a thought occurred to her, a flimsy straw to grasp at. A brief search in the parlor yielded Aunt Letty's photo albums. Darinda carried them upstairs and got into bed with them. First she glanced out the window. No sign of the yellow wolf.

Darinda settled into bed with Lorraine's old robe tucked around her and started flipping through the snapshots of Roderick's history. This wasn't some wolf/coyote war. She knew that in her bones. The cards knew it too, and had told her so. Roderick had been the focus of this from the start and remained so. Why? Because, as a wolf alone, he made the easiest target? Who among his pack would think so?

"Is it you?" she hissed at an image of Bernadette Chase. "Or you?" she asked Tamra Chase's portrait. "It can't be about money or rank. You've got that already. Who benefits most if Roderick dies? Who wins when the alpha loses?" She went through the pages one by one. These were wolves she didn't know, or thought she didn't. Not until she turned a page and found Bernadette's carnivore eyes once again peering up at her. This was a much younger Bernadette, around Roderick's current age. The strong-featured, gray-maned were male beside her looked to be at least fifteen years older. Roderick's father. She knew that at once by the set of his eyes, his brow and the arrogant thrust of his chin. He stood just a hair behind his mate. Had their marriage been arranged as well? Somehow Darinda couldn't see Bernadette submitting to anyone else's decision regarding her life. Or Roderick, for that matter. It burned in the eyes of both Chases. These wolves would not, could not submit.

And neither could she.

She heard Roderick's footfall on the stairs and quickly shut the album. She picked up another at random. He stopped outside her door, then knocked, then turned the knob without waiting for an invitation.

"It won't work," Darinda started, then shut her mouth. If he insisted on being pushy, let him find out for himself.

The door opened a crack, and Roderick stuck his foot in. The wards sparked and snapped. Roderick yelled and yanked his foot back. The door swung all the way in, revealing him with his feet planted wide for fight or flight and the hairs on his forearms bristling. "What the hell was that?"

"I warded my room. I see it's working."

"You might have warned me."

"You might have asked permission before barging right in."

He glowered and showed teeth. "May I come in?"

"Are you going to behave?"

He sighed mightily. "You have my word of honor."

She climbed out of bed and went to the doorway, took Roderick by the hand and drew him inside. "I expect you to keep your word, not just to me but to Coraline. Are we clear?"

He snorted, but sat on the edge of the bed and didn't try to crowd her. He noticed the albums. "What are you doing?"

"Pursuing a long shot. That coyote said something about one of Alfie's relatives wanting the wolves dead. If it's another coyote, then he knows a bit too much about pack movements and wolf family politics. I find that odd, considering nobody will even admit to knowing a coyote, don't you?"

His eyes narrowed. "What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything yet. I just want a closer look at your family members."

"The Chase line is pure. It's been so for centuries. We have our own volume of the Registry, for pity's sake. We breed true to the blood. We don't mingle. Certainly not with coyotes."

"That's not what I've heard, Mr. Likes-to-Jump-Humans."

"That's a romp, not breeding. It's not even fun half the time. Mostly I pursued apes because it put Mother's tail in a kink." He regarded her sidewise. "Have you ever...?"

She eyed him sharply. "Ever what?"

"Mingled. With another species."

"That's not a question a gentleman asks a lady."

"I'm no gentleman. I'm a wolf. You seem to know far too much about vampires than is normal for the living. You had one in your shop the night I was shot at. And what about that vet?"

"Who, Dr. Clark? He's a regular customer." Her mouth quirked. "And he's got a nice ass."

"Leeches," Roderick growled. "Their reputation as spectacular lovers is totally undeserved."

"Been with one, have you?"

"We caught one at the Manor. Thought he could help himself to the staff." His smile was quick and utterly unpleasant. "He wasn't so alluring when we had him begging for his life."

"I don't want to hear it."

"So you are keen on bats."

"Who I'm keen on is none of your business. Is that's what you came in to talk about?"

"No, it wasn't. I don't know how we keep getting into these conversations." His smile relaxed and lost its cutting edge. "Leap right in and bite, that's weres. We're not so good with small talk."

"You do okay. For the record, no, I'm not into vampires. I like taking walks in the sunlight. As far as mingling goes, well, since I'm the product of a mixed marriage myself, I have nothing against it. Within reason, that is. For instance, gargoyles are out of the question."

"So if I were free, you might consider—"

"You're not," she cut him off, "so there's no point in speculating. Please, let's keep this strictly business. We'll both be happier."

"No, we won't. I don't think you should be alone tonight."

She didn't want to be. That last little puddle of helplessness in her soul just wouldn't go way. She wanted him beside her. Hecate help her, she wanted the wolf's protection. "Same as before, okay?"

He jumped up at once and began to strip. "You're not watching, are you?" he teased.

"No." But she peeked. He also had a fine ass.

He shifted form before the last item of clothing hit the floor. The wolf cleared the space between floor and bed in one leap and curled up beside her. His tail hung over the side of the bed. Darinda ruffled the fur on his shoulders and opened another album.

He showed little interest in the snapshots until he spotted Bernadette. His lip lifted. Darinda quickly turned the page. Bernadette appeared again, but part of a group of six others. They were down at the waterfront, perhaps forty years ago. Darinda zeroed in at once on the stout but pretty wolf seated at a table at the small café the pack had taken over. "Hey, look. It's Aunt Letty."

Roderick leaned in. His ears tipped forward. He whuffed a question.

"One of those trips to Philadelphia Big Alex talked about," Darinda guessed. "In fact—oh. Oh my goodness, look at this." She put her finger on the image of a gangly were with bristly hair and an enormous grin. "That's him. That's Big Alex himself."

Roderick peered at the photo, and shook his head. Where's the rest of him?

"So Big Alex was a skinny kid once. Who would've thought?" She noticed his eyes hadn't changed. Even as a youth they radiated possession. *This is mine, all mine.* Just as Bernadette's had at the Chase family gathering. Big Alex had chosen wisely when he rejected Bernadette as a mate.

They looked at a number of photos together. Finally Roderick yawned and put his head down on his paws. Presently he began to snore.

Darinda went on rifling through the photos. She found plenty of shots of Philadelphia dating from the '60s and '70s. There were Letty and George Meadows, at some sort of formal gathering that might have been their wedding. Big Alex was present but not Bernadette. She spotted a buffet table laden with food and plenty of weres taking advantage of it. She squinted at the wolves at the head of the line. Unless she was mistaken that was Ellis Duquesne with beta brother Albert at his shoulder. She scoured the photo and didn't see Nora. Maybe they hadn't yet mated when the picture was taken.

That pretty much did it for the group shots. The rest she labeled vacation photos—touristy scenes of Philadelphia, the Jersey Shore, Lancaster County, upstate New York, the Grand Canyon. She found the Duquesne brothers again in a photo with *Potter County*—1977 written beneath it in Letty's neat, rounded hand. Five men and three wolves posed proudly with two bucks hanging from a tree. George Meadows and Ellis Duquesne were two of the men. Darinda assumed Albert to be the wolf with the serious expression seated at Ellis's side. None of the men carried firearms.

No sign of coyotes, either. No one in any of the photos she'd looked at appeared to be anything other than a wolf.

So how had coyotes gotten involved? Where was the connection? Who was the coyote relative who wanted the wolves destroyed?

Her eyes fixed on Albert, the faithful beta. How was he doing, she wondered. Well enough to talk? A human had shot him, but if Albert could identify that human the shooter could lead them to Alfie. She ought to call Dr. Clark.

Darinda shut the album and piled it and the other two on her nightstand, carefully reaching over Roderick. "Time for all tired little detectives to hit the sack," she murmured. Roderick twitched an ear but didn't wake.

On impulse, she let her hand rest lightly on his head. His body moved slightly, pressing closer to hers, intent on protecting her even in sleep.

She withdrew her hand. You never tame the wolf, or the witch. No sensible person would want to. No sane person would try. She rolled over, burrowed under the covers, and waited for sleep to claim her.

Chapter 14

Darinda eased out of a deep, thick sleep to the song of a single bird determinedly announcing his lordship over a tree outside her window. The sun on the floor slanted at a late-morning angle. So much for calling Dr. Clark.

She yawned and tried to sit up. Her body encountered resistance. Her mouth stayed open, then shut with a snap, all thoughts of sunlight forgotten.

Where the wolf had gone to sleep the night before a very naked Roderick now lay beside her. He must have shifted form in his sleep. He'd shifted position as well, from a ball to stretched out along her length, one leg atop hers, one heavy arm flung across her torso. Every now and then he breathed a gentle snore. His hands and legs twitched, like a dog's in sleep, as if he chased prey in his dreams.

Darinda smiled in spite of herself. She couldn't help it any more than she could stop her hand from reaching out to touch his ebony hair. Its texture was smoother than the wolf's pelt but just as thick and invited caresses.

Touching him was like eating chocolate. Once she got started, she couldn't quit. She slid her hand off his hair down to his shoulders, then along the arm that had captured her. When she reached his hand, she lifted it to her lips and whispered kisses on his fingertips, one by one. He murmured in his sleep.

Carefully Darinda eased his arm off her body and worked her leg out from under his. The things that filled her head right now simply couldn't happen. Not that she couldn't pretend, if only for a couple of minutes. But fantasy was all it could remain.

She gave his hair a final affectionate pat. Oh, what the hell. Fairy tales as well as chocolate were her biggest weaknesses. She leaned over and brushed a kiss across his lightly-parted lips. Roderick opened his eyes.

He came awake and alert in a second, like any wild animal. She snatched her hand back, far too late. He bared his teeth in a feral smile. He knew what she'd been up to. "Good morning," he said. "Feeling much better, I see."

"It's late." She tried to nudge him off the bed. He didn't budge. He tightened his arm around her waist when she tried to scoot away. "Really. The sun's up already. What time is it?"

"Long past time." He covered her torso with his. She could feel the heat and wildness of him even through the blankets. His eyes were predator's, hot and untamed, with the prey in his sights.

"Don't," she warned him, but she didn't move. Her voice sounded breathless and uncertain. "This isn't what I want."

"That's not what your scent is telling me."

"My scent is a terrible liar. Let me up."

Instead he leaned closer, pressed harder. "Stop me," he challenged. "You're a witch. You've got the power, and I'm unprotected. There's no way I could force you. Am I right?"

His mouth hovered scarcely a breath above hers. Memory of the kiss at Lupin Hill seared her brain. He had tasted of power and blood and the wild. And she'd had a good long drink of it, enough to desperately want another.

Her hands betrayed her. They moved to his shoulders and skimmed along the hardened muscles of his back instead of shoving him off. He would let her go if she asked him. She felt it through her touch. Her lips parted, but the feeble protest she'd meant to deliver never made it to air.

Roderick grinned. His canines, thicker than a human's, glinted in the shafts of sunlight. "That's what I thought," he said, and kissed her.

Pure wolf. No finesse. He simply dove in for the kill. His mouth on hers was everything she remembered and then some. She moaned against it and sent her tongue on an exploratory expedition. It met his halfway and they traded extensive notes. He tasted like hot blood and hotter flesh and long, panting lopes in the moonlight. It made her want to bury her teeth in something that wasn't a vegetable. She nibbled at his lower lip and won his rough growl in response.

Done with her mouth, he moved on to her throat. His teeth grazed the tissue-thin skin that shielded the pulsing artery. Darinda tensed for the bite.

The tip of his tongue flicked over the spot instead, gentle as a feather's touch, gentle as her responsive sigh. Encouraged, he swept his tongue over her throat and down to the little hollow of her collarbone and won himself a longer, deeper sigh.

Nor was Darinda passive prey. Her hands mounted a feverish assault along his shoulders and back, as far down as they could reach. All muscle, all of it quivering in delight at her touch. She scratched her nails shallowly up his back, through the stiff, thin pelt that covered it. His answering moan had a growl in it. The moan lowered in pitch when she hauled his mouth back to hers again, vibrating against her lips.

He'd reached the extent of the flesh exposed to him. He slid the blanket lower, and parted her robe until her breasts were bare. "Last chance," he offered. "You want to stop me, now would be the time."

Her fingers fisted in his hair. "You're still an asshole," she murmured.

"Granted." He lowered his tongue to her throat, then down to her breast to lap her left nipple.

Darinda gasped. His tongue was rougher than a human's, and far more flexible. Heat exploded in her belly and rushed at once down to the center of her. She abruptly wanted that rough tongue down there, not messing around with her breast, delicious though that felt.

"Don't," she managed and lost all words and all resistance in a moan. On the edge of betraying all she believed in, she fell before the power of the wolf.

* * * *

Roderick didn't even bother to lift his head at her mumbled protest. "Don't what? Don't stop? All right." He transferred his attentions, and his tongue, to her right breast. His hands dragged the blanket down a good six inches. Her scent betrayed her willingness, her surrender to him. The prey was nearly his. His penis swelled and hardened in response.

Then all at once her odor changed, going uncertain, acidic. Resistant. Her hands went stiff on his shoulders. He lifted his head a fraction. His voice came out more growl than words. "What's the matter now?"

"I...can't. This is wrong. I can't."

A London Werewolf in America

"Of course you can. You already are. This isn't another witch thing, is it? Because—" He caught himself and snarled. "Lycaon bite it. You're virgin, aren't you? And if you sleep with a man you'll lose your powers."

"Of course I'm not," she said irritably. "That's an old wives' tale. I want to. I do. I want you, but I can't. You're bound to Coraline."

"Sod her. I'm done with her. I'm done with the whole bitten lot. I won't marry her. I won't spend my life bound to that stinking yippy bitch. You're the one I want. You're my perfect mate. I knew that the second I scented you."

He dove for her breast again. This time she pushed his face away. "No. You made an oath. I can't break an oath or help another break theirs. That *is* a witch thing." She moved beneath him, this time in retreat. "I'm sorry. I am. I'm really sorry."

He planted his hips atop hers and his hands on her shoulders, pinning her to the bed. "Oh no you don't. You've been waving your come-get-me odor in my nose for days. Well, here I am. We're going to satisfy the hell out of each other, and no stupid monkey oath is going to get in the w—"

Her body stiffened. Her eyes went dark as a summer sky before the lightning hits. He sensed her forces gathering.

"Oh bloody hell," he said.

She blasted him across the room.

It could have been worse. He could have gone through the wall, not just into it. She hadn't slammed him as hard as she could have. She must still harbor some affection for him.

Tell that to his back. He massaged it while he squinted through the bright red and white slashes that streaked his vision. She had gotten out of bed, with the robe fastened as securely as a castle gate. Her face was dead white, her huge eyes blinking rapidly as if against tears. "Get out."

"Are you daft? You just threw me into a wall. I can barely move."

She lifted her hand. The air thickened. "Find the strength."

He clawed a handhold on the dresser and levered himself erect with a lot of groans that weren't entirely fake. He risked a peek at her. No sympathy in those eyes. The pain, though, startled him. She *did* harbor affection for him, and he'd gone and thoroughly squelched it. "I didn't mean to—"

"I know what you meant to do. Get the hell out of my room."

The alpha wolf raised his territorial head. Who was this uppity she to order him around? "This is my house."

"And I'm leaving it. I quit. Big Alex's boys can watch over you. I'll leave the wards on the rooms. They'll last at least a week. If you still feel you need a bodyguard, find some other witch's leg to hump."

"I said I was sorry."

"You're only sorry you didn't get to bury your bone. I should have paid attention when you laid down the 'no mingling' rule. You don't care about me at all. I'm just another monkey to you."

"No. Not you. You're—"

"Out of here."

The air caught him and propelled him through the open doorway and almost into yet another wall. His clothing followed, blown through the door in a tangle. The door slammed shut in his face.

He tried the knob. Locked. "Darinda. Darinda, we're not through."

"Oh yes we are." He could hear her stomping around in there, yanking open dresser drawers and slamming closet doors. "I'm done with you and your meat-eating werewolf arrogance. Go lick somebody else. Go hump your wife. I'm through."

"Meat-eating'?" He sputtered. "Spoken like an herbivore. We used to eat people like you."

"When you could catch us. When we weren't cowering up in the trees flinging our poop at you. Isn't that what you really mean?"

Bugger. What was it about females of every species that made them so bloody irrational? "Darinda, listen. I'm not going to marry Coraline. I broke it off. She's out of the picture for good. Open this door and face me like a wolf, dammit!"

She opened the door. Fully dressed in her trim jeans and sweater with that ridiculously huge bag on her shoulder and her suitcase in hand. "Nice try. If you're not getting married, you might as well go home. Which ends the terms of my employment. My work here is done."

He didn't budge from the doorway so she budged him, a shove of air that sent him reeling back. He didn't try to follow her. He stood in the hall and seethed and listened to the deliberate racket she made clattering down the stairs. "Fine, then! Get out! Who needs your pathetic protection? You're fired!" "I already quit."

"Call it whatever you want. I'm finished with you, you—" Insults deserted him. "Grass-eater!"

He went to the head of the stairs. She'd reached the door. She actually meant it. She was leaving. He tried to hurl some witty, scathing epithet at her, but all that came out was a growl, and a thin growl at that. If he weren't such a powerful, high-ranking male, he'd almost call it a whimper.

At the threshold, she turned. Here it came, her parting shot. She stared up at him. He glared back, gripping the rail until he was certain either it or his hand would break. Whatever vile words she flung at him, he could easily match her, and then some.

"Good-bye," she said. Pause. "I'm sorry." Pause. "Put some pants on." And she was gone.

Roderick stood there until the sound of her car faded into the distance. Then he howled—long, loud, and searing with frustration and fury. His hand left the rail and hit the floor and blurred into a paw. He plowed downstairs, through the kitchen and out Aunt Letty's custom-wolf-sized doggy door into the back yard.

Women. Can't live with them, can't rend them into little bloody strips. Somewhere in this blighted alien world some innocent rabbit or squirrel was about to pay the ultimate price. Eyes burning, Roderick went hunting.

* * * *

Norman, at least, was glad to see her. The dragon hissed, flicked his indigo tongue over her hands, and eyed her possibly flammable scarf with undisguised longing. Darinda distracted him with a belly rub. The spines that lined his backbone took on a contented emerald tinge. "Did you miss me?" Darinda cooed. "Who's mommy's good boy?"

"So the case is closed?" Peri said.

"As far as I'm concerned. We didn't actually catch anybody, but, well, he's got Big Alex's troops watching out for him. I figured it was safe for me to leave."

"He made a pass at you, didn't he? A good one, too, I'll bet, or you wouldn't be glaring at me like that. Okay, that's it. Put down the dragon and spill."

"It wasn't a pass." A pass was a casual thing. What happened this morning had been far removed from casual. "You were right about werewolves. They're selfish and arrogant and insensitive and class- and species-conscious like you wouldn't believe. I put up with it for as long as I could until finally I just had enough. So I terminated my employment and here I am." There. Made it through the speech without her voice hitching. She patted Norman's tummy, well pleased with herself.

"You sure you're okay? You don't look so okay."

"I'm fine. He was a jerk. You had him pegged from the start. The less said about him, the better. Now, how's it been since I've been gone?"

"Vamps, Goths and tourists. Same old same old. Nice try, but you don't fall off the hook that easy. I'm going over to Tina's and pick us up some ice cream. Then you're going to tell me what that son of a bitch did to you to make you look so miserable."

Darinda sighed. "Mint chocolate chip. And see if you can find me a soft pretzel."

"Gotcha. Yo, Springsteen! Howzabout some air?"

The cat hopped off the sill and up onto the counter, and from there onto Peri's shoulder. "Be right back," she promised. "Try not to hex anybody while I'm gone."

Goddess, Darinda thought, does it show that bad? She avoided a response by petting Norman until well after Peri had gone. The dragon steamed contentedly.

"Glad you've got it all figured out," she murmured as she returned Norman to his tank. She treated him to some extra charcoal dipped in lighter fluid, just the way he liked it. If only all males could be so easily placated.

Men. Can't live with 'em, can't have 'em neutered. Life would be so much easier all around if only they weren't such...males.

"Who am I kidding?" she muttered to Norman. "He's not even a man. He's a beast who thinks I'm a monkey. Like wolves are any better. Can you believe the gall of him?"

Norman blinked his bottom lids. "You can say that again," she said. "He only wanted to jump me because I was there. Because I was convenient. And him with a fiancée. He knows I'm all about oaths and honor and keeping your word and he still figured I'd just ignore all that and do what we both wanted to."

That's what brought the tears to her eyes and twisted the blade in her heart. Because he'd figured right. She'd been willing to ignore something vital to her being for a chance to share her heart with a wolf. Because he wasn't just a shallow mutt out for a quick hump, was he? Wolves might jump anything that stood still long enough, but they didn't mate lightly. She knew his mind, could sense his intentions. This morning hadn't been any casual romp, not to him. He'd tried to draw her into his pack, into his life. He'd meant to mate with her. He'd wanted to make her his one and only mate for the rest of their lives.

Which is why she'd had to make a break for it, before she had to learn what real commitment to an oath might do to her sense of independence.

"Can't do that." She puttered around with a display of herbal powders on the counter. If she didn't keep her hands busy they'd start shaking. "I'm a witch. You know what that means. Witches walk alone."

Except maybe for Mom. Mom had foreseen married life and walked right into it with arms and heart wide open. With a mortal, yet.

"That's different," she asserted to Norman. "Dad's human. Nothing like a wolf. All bull-headed and snotty and thinks he's so much better than us lesser beings. Just like a..."

Witch.

"Oh, what do you know?" she flung at the tank. "You just sit in the sun all day. You didn't have to put up with him. I did the right thing by walking out on him. In fact, I'll prove it. Watch."

She darted around the counter and dug out her poker deck. A shuffle brought the cards to life. They practically throbbed with warmth, eager to tell their message. She did another shuffle, cut the deck, and dealt.

Queen of Hearts. So far, so good. She peeked at the second card.

King of Spades.

Okay, misdeal. No biggie. She shuffled again and started over. Queen of Hearts. Darinda inched up a corner of the next card and glimpsed black. Best two out of three. Yet another shuffle and cut, then she slapped down five cards in quick succession without looking. She completed the deal with her eyes averted and set the rest of the deck aside. "All right," she said to Norman's tank, and looked.

Queen of Hearts. King of Spades. Three diamonds, then the two of clubs, followed by the two of spades. After that a solid line of black with

only the desperately hopeful Ace of Hearts erupting near the end. She noted with a sinking heart that the reading ended black.

Change, for the worse. The King and Queen were still bound together, though not for long if the spades and clubs had any say. Their line had nearly overwhelmed the red. The danger to Roderick had increased drastically. Because she had left him? If she didn't go back to him and fulfill her oath to him, would he die?

The bell over the door jingled. Customer. Relieved, Darinda swept the cards off the counter before she looked up. Her welcoming smile froze on her face, and her greeting shriveled away.

The woman let the door swing shut. She wore a smart red designer dress that clung to her like tape. Her face was perfectly made up, her hair expertly coiffed. She narrowed her yellow eyes and assessed the shop. Her aristocratic nose found the place not at all to her liking, to judge by the severe wrinkle that appeared in it. She pointed that nose at Darinda, and her scarlet lips pulled back from her teeth. Coraline Duquesne.

"So here you are," she hissed.

"Yes. Here I am," Darinda said warily. "What can I do for you?"

"Stay away from Roderick Chase. He's mine. He was promised to me. He's not interested in you at all. You're just a stain on the carpet."

Darinda came out from behind the counter. Probably not the wisest move, but she'd had enough werewolf bigotry lately to last her a lifetime. "I don't work for Roderick any more. You want to protect him, go right ahead. You have my blessing."

Coralline took a threatening forward stride. "I don't need your permission, or anything else from you."

"Fine. Hate my guts. I don't care. I'm done with him in particular and werewolves in general. Now get your tail out of my store."

"Don't lie to me, you monkey slut. You want him. I can smell it on you." A growl built in her throat, making her words hard to follow. "You need to be taught your place in the world. It isn't with him."

"I don't—" Darinda started, then gave it up. Any wolf who invaded another's territory and threatened them in their own den wasn't about to listen to reason. "Okay, you win. You're right. We've been screwing each other for days. I'm probably carrying his litter right now. What are you going to do about it?"

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Coraline aimed a hard slap at her face. Darinda caught her wrist. The were was strong, but Darinda was ticked. She let Coraline yank and curse for a couple of seconds, then let her go with a shove of air. Coraline staggered back several steps before she regained her footing. The she-wolf rubbed her wrist and snarled ferociously.

Too late. That one touch had told Darinda everything.

"That's the only one you get," Darinda warned her. "This is my place, the heart of my power. Quit while you're ahead."

Not until she'd trounced her supposed rival, said the snarl in Coraline's voice. "Don't think you can scare me off, or snare him with your magics. He's alpha. How long did you think a weak little ape like you could hold him?"

"I wasn't trying. When were you planning to tell him you're half coyote?"

That wiped the snarl from Coraline's lips and all the color that wasn't makeup from her face. "I should have figured," Darinda went on. "You've been spying on me at Meadowlands. Blonde woman, blonde wolf. A rare hair color for wolves, but not for coyotes. That explains the gallons of perfume, too. Disguise the musk from the mixed heritage. Good thing for you your family dropped out of the Registry, isn't it? Be tough to prove a pure lineage."

"You won't tell him," Coraline spat, her anger surging back. "He's our chance to bind ourselves to a full-blooded pack. My shot at respectability. No stinking monkey's going to muck that up."

"What's Alfie to you?" Darinda persisted. "Cousin? Brother? Lover?"

Coraline leaped and shifted. Her smart little red dress fluttered across the shop in shreds. Darinda hit the floor with the raging yellow wolf on top of her.

Darinda had learned a few things from her encounter with the coyotes at Valley Forge. She grabbed the she-wolf by the ruff and just barely managed to keep Coraline's teeth from her neck. A head butt to Coraline's sensitive muzzle stopped her attack long enough for Darinda to thicken the air and fling her off. Coraline tumbled into the rack of wizard robes. While the wolf snapped at linen sleeves and untangled her legs from the folds, Darinda cast about for a weapon.

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Coraline shook off the last of the garments and charged. Darinda snatched up the nearest tin of powder from the counter display and pitched its contents into Coraline's face. Coraline skidded across the floor. She shook her head. A cough tangled up with a sneeze. She pawed at her muzzle. The sneezes grew into a howl of pain. She glared at Darinda through watery, reddened eyes and barked incomprehensible threats.

Darinda skimmed the printing on the tin. *Heart Happy*. A diet additive, main ingredient cayenne pepper. "Ouch," she murmured.

Before Coraline could resume her assault the door swung open and Peri lunged inside. "Get 'im, boy!" she yelled and tossed Springsteen at the wolf. The cat landed square on Coraline's shoulders. At last, a hated canine to rend. He dug in his claws and went to work.

Peri and Darinda darted behind the counter, away from the violently thrashing, rolling mass of flashing teeth and fur. All at once the wolf vanished. A screaming, sobbing, crimson-eyed Coraline staggered desperately for the door. Springsteen leaped off her back and flashed around the counter. Darinda would have sworn he was grinning.

Coraline made it to the door. She yanked it open, then turned to face them. Her makeup had flaked off during her shapeshift, and left her reddened face looking puffy and ugly. "I'll kill you!" she shrilled. "I'll rip out your guts and your damned cat's too!"

"Go home, Lassie," Peri said and air-shoved Coraline through the doorway. She wasn't as adept as Darinda. Coraline hit the frame more than once. Or maybe, Darinda considered, she was only as good as she needed to be.

"Witch!"

"Bitch." Peri slammed the door in her face. After a final pound on the glass, Coraline stumbled off.

"Yeesh." Peri surveyed the wreckage. "That was one unhappy customer. You okay, Dar? You need rabies shots or anything?"

"I'll live." Darinda assessed her own personal damage. She had some scratches on her face, hands and arms, and a big sore spot on her back end from that trip to the floor. The shop was in far worse shape, with jars and upset displays and wizarding robes scattered everywhere. "Thanks, you guys." She patted Springsteen. The cat endured her gratitude for a moment, then strutted across the powder-strewn floor to his windowsill, growling every high-step of the way. He'd be a while settling down. And so would—

"Crap." Darinda dove for the tank, from which steam rose in a mushroom cloud. Stormin' Norman was building up to overload. She wrapped a thick robe around her arms and carefully lifted him out. His tongue speared the air frantically. "It's okay, baby, mommy's okay," Darinda soothed. "Good thing you showed up when you did. Norman's about to erupt. Another minute and we'd be calling the fire department."

"Yeah. I saw you two through the window. Who was that, one of your werewolf's girlfriends?"

"Fiancée."

"Youch." Peri winced. "Nothing like a jealous bitch to put a cramp in your day." She went outside and retrieved a shopping bag heavy with ice cream and pretzels. She fed a bite of pretzel to Norman. His back spines relaxed. "We'd better charm the door. No dogs allowed."

"I don't think she'll be back." Darinda shivered. She could still smell hot, meat-laden breath in her face, and feel truth in the palm of her hand. She set Norman down inside his tank. "I have to call Roderick."

"Leave her. The dog catcher'll get her."

"Not about that. The coyotes have been trying to kill him, and Coraline's half coyote. He needs to know. They all need to know."

She used the wall phone to call Meadowlands. She already knew the number by heart, a heart that pounded increasingly hard when the phone rang and rang and no one picked up. After the twenty-fifth ring she gave up. "He's not answering."

"So call the cute one. Officer Charlie. He'll need to bail her out sooner or later anyway."

"Forget it. I'm not pressing charges. Too hard to explain. Let her go."

"She won't go too far without this." Gleefully, Peri held up a remnant of Coraline's once-sharp little red dress. "Not even on South Street."

So that's what all that yelling and those sirens outside were about. Darinda reached for the phone again. "Hope Charlie's on duty."

"He isn't. I checked when I—"

She broke off guiltily. Darinda stopped dialing. "While you were out there peeking through the window, watching me fight for my life, did you happen to call the police?" "Um...I might've."

The timbre of the shouts changed in tone, fright and panic ascendant. How humans might sound if, say, a bleeding naked woman suddenly turned into a wolf before their eyes. All at once a series of shrill yelps arose, as if said hypothetical wolf had just gotten tasered. "You're an evil being, Peri," Darinda said.

"Hey, we aren't all fairy dust and twinkles. My kind has a rep for heartlessness. Look it up. Besides, you're my friend and you know I'm not a dog person. Now are you gonna help me clean this up or what?"

Chapter 15

Darinda cleaned, but first she phoned. She couldn't leave Roderick on his own against the Duquesnes. When he didn't answer a second time she tried Charlie at the police station. No response there, either. Fortunately Eugene was listed in the phone book. Aunt Letty picked up. "Darinda, dear. How nice to hear from you."

Darinda cut the chitchat short and relayed her grim discovery. "Coyotes?" Aunt Letty said. "Oh my. That would explain why they're not in the Registry."

"I came to the same conclusion. Given the trouble your family's been having, I felt Roderick needs to know."

"Can't you tell him yourself? You are still protecting him, aren't you?"

"Not exactly. Something came up. I had to go back to the shop. Big Alex left a patrol in the yard. Roderick should be safe."

Darinda heard snuffling over the line, as if Aunt Letty were trying to gauge her scent through fiber optic cable. "Did something happen between you and Roddy, dear? Is he being a hound to you again?"

"It's nothing I can't handle. Don't worry about it."

"You have to understand, dear. The Chases are an old, blooded line. We can get a bit rigid in our thinking, especially where other species are concerned. If Roddy's being boorish, I can—Emma has a phrase for it. Rip him a new one?"

"I'll be fine," Darinda said, grinning into the phone. "Don't put yourself out. Just get the world to him as soon as you can, okay?"

"Of course I will, dear. This is serious. I can't believe Ellis would be so deceptive. Detty's not going to like this."

To say nothing of the Duquesnes's reaction. Once news of Coraline's pedigree leaked, that would end the wedding plans and any further reason to

keep Roderick alive. "I tried calling Charlie, but he wasn't in. Can you get hold of him, too? Let him know? Roderick may need police protection."

"Nonsense. You're all Roddy needs. He likes you, dear, and so do I. So does the rest of the family. I hope you can get back to him soon. I've never seen him so relaxed and thoughtful toward someone who wasn't a wolf."

Relaxed, right. Thoughtful, sure. Too bad magic couldn't fix everything, Darinda thought as she hung up the phone.

She'd done all she could. Roderick's family would help him deal with the Duquesne situation. She'd deal with the rest on her own. It wasn't a satisfactory solution, but right or wrong, it was the best she could come up with.

She was able to put troubling thoughts aside for a time while she and Peri repaired the damage done to Set A Spell. Fortunately most of it was cosmetic. They'd lost some jars of herbs and a badger skull when one of the shelves toppled over, but that was the worst of it. "Why did we have a badger skull again?" Peri asked.

"Ambiance, mostly. There's some kind of spell you can use it for, but I can't remember what just now. I'm more concerned about these candles. We can't sell these as is. The holders are all dented. Look."

Peri turned one over in her hands and fingered the dimple in the metal. "Half-price sale?"

"We'll have to. I know. We can tell customers a poltergeist invaded the store and wrecked our inventory. We can have a store-wide event. Make a day of it."

"Sounds like fun. Better than having to tell people the place got trashed by a jealous werewolf."

She broke off. It didn't matter that Darinda had her back to the door. She didn't need to see the alarm creeping over Peri's face or hear Springsteen's hiss from the windowsill. She knew who'd just opened the door and made the bell go off. She knew whose harsh panting that was and whose yellow eyes were boring into the back of her neck.

"Are you all right?" Roderick said to Darinda's back.

Slowly she turned round to face him. Thank Hecate he'd gotten dressed before barging back into her life. If you wanted to count that slapdash effort as dressed, she thought. His shirt tail hung out and his belt flapped loose and his jacket hung half off his shoulders. He had a faint smear of blood on his chin and a few gray hairs around his mouth that might have come from a squirrel. His eyes locked onto hers. What she saw in them dried up any smart remark she might have been tempted to make.

"I came as soon as I heard," he plunged on. "Did she hurt you?"

Darinda mutely shook her head. Peri, in spite of her obvious interest, picked discretion and quietly slipped into the back. Springsteen followed suit, an orange blur that went from sill to storage room in record time. Darinda's brain barely registered either retreat.

"Nothing happened," she managed at last. "She came to warn me off you. Things got ugly. Springsteen took care of her. I called you, but you wouldn't pick up."

"I was out." He wiped the blood and squirrel hairs off his face with the back of his hand. "Where is she now?"

"Either jail or the pound, I'm not sure. Depends on the shape she was in. You'll have to talk to Charlie." She could sense his heartbeat, fast and loud, pounding in perfect rhythm with hers. The ragged concern in his voice touched her at her core. If only she could forget this morning, everything would be fine. "*Did* you talk to Charlie?"

"Aunt Letty. She said you'd been attacked by Coraline, then blathered something about coyotes and ripping me a new one. A new what? Oh, never mind. You've got to come back to Meadowlands. Obviously you're still in danger."

"I'm not coming back. I quit, and you know why."

"I apologized for that. I was being a dog."

"I know." She carefully set the dented candles back on the shelf, careful also not to look directly at him. "My word is important to me. I can't work for someone who takes that lightly or expects me to. You don't have to worry about me anymore, I can take care of myself. You've got Big Alex's muscle. You don't need a bodyguard. Now I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

He planted himself in front of the door. "Not without you."

"Yes. Without me." She raised her hand. She couldn't open the door because he was blocking it, but she could give him a warning nudge. "Don't make me throw you into a wall again."

"Throw me around all you like. I'm not leaving without you and that's that."

Damn stubborn wolf. "I'm not coming back to work for you."

"Yes, you are. If you won't agree, I'll simply stand here and howl until you do."

"That'll bring in the cops."

"Of which Charlie is one."

"And let your enemies know where you are. Maybe even bring them down on you."

"We're certain to catch them then, aren't we?"

"Stop saying 'we'."

"No. We're still a team. Don't try to tell me quitting counts. You swore to protect me. You gave your word. You made a promise to me, and you broke it. Isn't that in violation of the witch's creed or something?"

"You know damn well why I left."

"Yes." He thrust his hands into his pockets. "I'm sorry. I'm racist and speciesist and several kinds of a git. You're not a monkey or an ape or a baboon or any form of the word 'simian.' You're human and a witch, and I mean both in only the most complimentary terms. Is this sufficient, or must I beg?"

"That isn't necessary."

But Roderick had already gotten down on the floor. He lay on his back and tugged his shirt out of his waistband, baring his belly in werewolf submission. Horrified, Darinda ran to him. "Don't! For Goddess's sake, get up. What if somebody sees you like that?" Peri, for instance. The badlymuffled chortles from the back told Darinda she could abandon that hope. She hauled on Roderick's arms and got him into a sitting position. "I accept your apology, you big stupid mutt. Now cut it out."

"Are you coming back to Meadowlands?"

"No. I can't. It wouldn't be right."

"What, because of our bedroom scene? I apologize for how it ended. Not for how it began. I wasn't the one who started things, remember?"

Peri gasped. Darinda shushed him frantically. "Look." She lowered her voice. "What happened between us...well, it shouldn't have. That was my fault. I made a mistake."

"You are virgin."

This time Peri snorted. Loudly. Roderick looked around. "Is that bloody cat back there?"

"Yes, and I'll sic him on you if you don't leave right now." Inwardly, Darinda vowed to smack Peri's pixie butt, just as soon as she got rid of Roderick. "A witch should never get involved with her employer. It's a violation of oaths. An ethical thing."

"There's no such oath. You're making this up as you go."

"That doesn't matter." Neither did her arguments, she realized. He was determined to out-stubborn her. Werewolves were masters at that. "If—*if*—I come back with you to Meadowlands, it will be as your bodyguard. Nothing else. No touchie, no beddy. Are we clear?"

"As glass." His objective achieved, Roderick got up smoothly. He tucked his shirt back in and meticulously straightened his jacket. "I won't lay so much as a finger on you. Only don't expect me to restrain myself if you make the first move again."

Peri guffawed. Darinda gritted her teeth. "I need to get my bag."

"Good. I hope you have your car. One of the guards dropped me off."

Peri scooted out of the way when Darinda charged into the office. She had a chokehold on Springsteen, who struggled for air in her grip. Darinda grabbed her shoulder bag and crammed some emergency herbs and powders into it. "So, how did it go?" Peri said innocently.

"I don't want to hear one word out of you. Not. One. Word."

Peri stifled a giggle. "Want me to save you some ice cream?"

Darinda glowered. She snatched up a soft pretzel and ripped off a bite like she was tearing out somebody's throat. "No ice cream for you," Peri said.

Roderick declined her offer of soft pretzel, so Darinda finished off the hapless snack in the car. "So what happens with Coraline now?"

"I really don't care. That's done. I never wanted to marry her anyway. Far too high-strung. Not to mention smelly."

"That was fast. I only just talked to Letty less than an hour ago."

"What do you mean?"

"You breaking the engagement. How did you even get hold of her? I figured she'd be in police custody by now."

"Not today. Last night. I assumed that's why she attacked you. I phoned Lupin Hill last night, while you were setting up your magics to bar me from your room." His lip curled minutely. "Coraline wasn't in, so I talked to her father. Let him know the match was unacceptable. Then, of course, I had to call home before he could." His mouth tightened in a chilly smile. "Mother was rather put out."

"Last night?" Darinda's memory hit rewind. All that snarling and howling over the phone. It explained the murderous expression in his eyes when he'd come charging out of the kitchen. So that's why he asked how she'd feel about him if he were free of his promise.

Sweet Hecate. He'd done it. Refused the match, defied his alpha, risked expulsion from his pack. She swallowed painfully down a throat suddenly restricted to a microscopic slit. "You didn't tell me."

"Of course I told you. Several times. I told you the engagement was off. You weren't in any mood to listen."

Darinda replayed the disastrous morning. Somewhere in there she vaguely recalled Roderick mentioning he was done with Coraline. The true meaning hadn't sunk in. Or, more likely, she'd been so caught up in her own self-righteousness, her determination to preserve her independence, that she hadn't let his revelation register. "All this was last night?"

"I believe I just said that—watch out for that truck!"

She'd been looking at him and not the road. The truck blared its horn. Darinda swerved. They missed each other by about six inches, a wide margin by city standards. Roderick swore colorfully in were. "Sorry," Darinda said.

"Are you sure you're not trying to kill me?"

"Sorry," she repeated. He could have no idea how sorry she was about so many things. "Are you going to be all right? With your mother and your pack, I mean."

"What else was I to do? You made it plain you wouldn't have me unless I were free and clear. I certainly had no desire to bind myself to Coraline. Anxious smelly bitch." He shuddered all over, like a dog shaking water from its coat. "Mother picked *that* out for me? She can go hang."

"Then Letty didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what? That Coraline attacked you? Yes, I got that part."

"I mean the rest of it."

He looked at her blankly. Darinda exited onto the Schuylkill Expressway and merged with the rest of the traffic. It would be easier to drive around the city to Fairmount Park than through it. "I guess it doesn't matter now, since the wedding's off, but it might have a bearing on all these attacks. It's about Coraline and the coyotes."

* * * *

He didn't take it well. He howled. He raged. Darinda thought he'd rip through his seat belt, so badly did he want to tear into something. Passing drivers glanced their way, then gave Darinda's car as wide a berth as traffic patterns would allow.

Roderick demanded Darinda drive him at once to Lupin Hill. Ellis Duquesne merited an immediate thrashing for his duplicity. "Where in Lycaon's name do you think you're going?" he roared when Darinda made the turn for Meadowlands instead.

"I'm taking you home," she said calmly. "Stop and think a minute. Ellis knows he tried to pull a fast one on your family. By now he's probably had to withstand a verbal assault from your mother. His brother's still on the critical list and his daughter's just been arrested. He won't be in the best of moods. You go charging in there all self-righteous and he's liable to hand you your tail. Not to mention Alfie's still out there. As far as we know, you're still on the hit list. I'm just doing my job here. Exactly what you hired me for."

"You're too bloody efficient, that's what you are," Roderick growled.

"I touched Albert," Darinda said. "I got only truth from him. Of course he'd know all about Coraline. Why didn't this come out? Because her being half coyote didn't pose a threat to the family," she answered her own question. "They'd pawned her off on you. Problem solved. His uppermost concern was keeping Ellis safe. That's all he thought about."

"He should have thought of himself more. Maybe then he wouldn't have gotten shot."

Darinda frowned. Albert's shooting threw a spanner into every one of her theories. "I don't think the danger's over yet," she said slowly. "There's more going on than we know."

She pulled the car up to the house. No wolves tracked their arrival, or answered Roderick's questioning bark. He motioned for Darinda to stay in the car while he sniffed the air. "That's odd. Looks like we've been abandoned." Darinda clutched her shoulder bag. "You think something happened to them?"

"Or they happened to someone." Roderick cupped his hands around his mouth and howled. Almost immediately, off to the north, they picked up a distant response. "Ah," Roderick said. "Coyote assault. The boys are showing them what for."

Darinda climbed warily out of the car. Something didn't feel right here. The vibes were off. Alarms jangled along her nerves like a bad itch. She laid her hand on Roderick's forearm. "Let me go in first."

One touch to the doorknob alerted her. She jerked her hand back as if bitten. "Somebody's inside," she said. "Someone who doesn't belong."

"Then he'd better get out." Roderick shouldered past her and charged into the house. Darinda tried to stop him with a grab at his jacket, but missed. Damn territorial wolf. She bolted within.

Roderick had stopped in the parlor. He stood, sniffed, snarled, and headed for the stairs. This time Darinda snagged his arm. "Together," she said.

He smiled down at her. "Absolutely."

They ascended a step at a time, both alert for danger. As it turned out, they had no need for caution. The intruder wasn't going anywhere.

He'd tried to enter Roderick's bedroom. Whatever charms he might have on him clearly hadn't worked. He hung suspended in the net of the wards like a bug in a spider's web. His face was slack, his gold eyes glazed. When Roderick and Darinda topped the stairs, he couldn't even muster a growl.

Darinda peered at him from a safe distance. He had blondish brown hair and a sharp nose atop a naked body scrawny as a stick. His features looked vaguely familiar to her, but she was sure she didn't recognize him.

Roderick's nose did. He strode to the doorway and closed his hand around their captive's neck. The smile on his face and the snarl in his voice both sent chills down her back. "Alfie, old boy. How wonderful to see you again."

Chapter 16

Darinda and Roderick stood by the door and studied the coyote on the bed. The coyote glared back. "Diversion," Darinda said. "Your friends lure Big Alex's guards away while you break into the house. I'll bet you got in through the doggy door. I knew I should have put a ward on that."

Alfie didn't say anything. His thin gold eyes marked the door and every one of the windows. No need to bind him, since with the wards in place he couldn't get out of the room. Darinda had provided him with a towel, which he'd wrapped around his middle on her orders. She might have to question him, perhaps even spell him, but she didn't have to look at him naked.

She wondered if binding might work better on Roderick, whose nonstop growl announced he was only seconds from ripping their captive to pieces. All right, she thought, work with that. "You'd better talk," she told Alfie. "Otherwise he'll kill you."

"And what'll that get you?" Alfie sneered. "I die, you learn scat, and the hunt goes on regardless. Face it, chickie. You need me alive."

"But not necessarily whole." Roderick started forward.

Darinda held out her arm, stopping him. "You'll talk," she told the coyote. "One way or another." She reached for him.

He was too cool, too self-assured. He didn't move or try to bite when she touched her hand to his forehead. The touch barely lasted a second. She snatched her hand back with a startled yell. Her fingers felt as if she'd dipped them in acid. A bit of smoke curled from their tips.

Roderick lunged at the smirking coyote. A powerful blow sent Alfie sprawling atop the coverlet. "What did I just tell you?"

"Don't. He didn't bite me." Darinda blew on her fingers. They stung, but the pain was fading. "He's got a hex on him. Some kind of mystic shield. It won't let me touch him."

"Can you read him without touching him?"

She shook her head. "Not deep enough to get anything useful."

"Well, then. Since obviously I *can* touch him, we'll just have to do this my way." He seized the groggy Alfie by the scruff of the neck. "Which bits would you like to lose first?"

"Wait. We can still do this my way. We just need to take stronger measures." She rooted around in her bag. Alfie watched with growing apprehension. "Last chance," she said to him. "Who are you working for? Who ordered Roderick killed?"

"Bite me, chickie. And your little dog, too."

"At least tell me which magician you're working with. I have my own scores to settle."

"Sure, why not? You magic monkeys want to waste each other, what's that to us?" He shook himself out of Roderick's grip and rubbed the back of his neck. "We been going to witches all over Philly. Over in Jersey, even. A spell here, a spell there. No pattern, no trail. Never the same witch twice."

She'd guessed as much. "No dark magic?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "Too expensive. And they want too much in exchange, like your fingers or your soul or whatever. Like the witches are any better. Won't even sell you a knife. 'What's it for? What do you want the charm to do? You swear you won't hurt anybody?' Chaos bite my tail, you gotta jump through hoops. They got this stupid oath thing. 'Do no harm.' Even when you offer 'em money. Who the scat stands by their word in this day and age?"

Roderick slanted a wry look at Darinda. "You'd be amazed."

"Same with the monkey muscle. We pay 'em, we use 'em, we send 'em on their way. Don't bother looking for 'em 'cause you won't find any. Sorry if I can't be more of a help."

"All dead ends, then," Roderick said. "Except for you."

"And you ain't getting scat out of me."

"We'll see," Darinda said.

She set her shoulder bag on the dresser and began to pull vials and drawstring packets out of it. The smug seeped out of Alfie's face. "Hey. That better not be poison. I got rights."

"Don't worry. I'm brewing a truth potion. One good sniff and you'll tell me everything and be happy to do it." She smiled. "I would have gotten far less with the touch, but you had to insist on the hard way." "Hey. Hey, wait a minute—"

"Too late." Darinda took a small clay bowl from her bag and poured the contents of a vial into it. Green liquid pooled in the bowl. Into this she sprinkled ground herbs from a pouch. A soft, smoky mist arose from the bowl, thick with the smell of mint. "You'd better wait in the hall," she told Roderick. "This can have a powerful effect on people with sensitive noses." She beamed evilly at Alfie. "Just imagine what it can do to a were."

His imagination was working just fine. She could tell from his worried posture and the way he flinched from the bowl. She swirled the liquid in the bowl, and its steamy billow increased. Anyone other than the spell caster who caught a whiff of it would be compelled to speak the truth. She extended the bowl toward Alfie and watched his eyes glaze over.

And only then became aware of Roderick hovering far too closely over her shoulder. "I said wait in the hall. This stuff's dangerous."

"And leave you alone in the room with that?" He thrust his chin at Alfie. His voice slurred over the consonants, and his eyes didn't seem to be focusing. "He'd kill you the second I turned my back. Fine mate I'd be if I allowed that to happen."

"Whoa. She's your *mate*?" Alfie said in the same fuzzy voice. "Dog, your pack's standards have fallen."

"Roderick," Darinda said, "please wait in the hall. I'll be all right. He can't—"

Roderick shouldered her aside to confront Alfie. "You will not speak in that tone to my mate."

"Holy scat, dog. She's not even shifter. Don't you teabags have rules against messing with the lower orders or something?"

"Bugger the rules. Bugger the pack. I never even wanted control of the pack to begin with. Bloody treacherous low-rankers fawning all over you, right before they go for your throat. Rip out your guts soon as look at you. Forget the upper ranks." He snarled. "Lift your leg too high and it's taken for threat. You can't relax for a second. And this is your family. Think what outsiders are like."

"Dog, that's rough."

"This trip is the first chance I've had to breathe in years. You are so fortunate," he said to Darinda. "Free to be whatever you want, mate with whomever you please. I love this country."

"I'm touched." She tried to steer him toward the door and away from the misty cloud hovering over the bed. "Roderick, please—"

"I always wanted to be a cowboy," he said dreamily. "Out in the wide open spaces with no damned pack trailing after you. Like that Eastwood fellow. He's one of us, you know. A wolf. If he isn't, he bloody well should be."

"No way," Alfie said. "He's a coyote. Gotta be. He's got a sense of humor. No wolf on the planet has a sense of humor. That's why you mutts are doomed."

"This is all fascinating," Darinda said, tugging at Roderick's arm. "However—"

"It would never work," Roderick said. "The cowboy thing. Horses don't like me. The predator-prey dynamic." His wistful smile disappeared, and he seized Darinda's shoulders. "You like me, don't you?"

"Um—"

"I wouldn't blame you if you hated me. You've put your life on hold and yourself at risk to protect me, and I've been such a perfect brute. I'm a—what's the Yank word?"

"Putz?" Alfie suggested.

"I was going to say 'ass,' but I suppose yours works. Darinda, you're a lovely, brave, patient woman who's been kinder to me than I deserve. I've never met a wolf I wanted to stand at my side more than you."

"Roderick you don't know what you're saying."

"The hell I don't. I'm in love with you."

"Whoa, dog," Alfie said.

Darinda got as far as "Rod—" before his mouth closed over hers and smothered all objections. She couldn't stop her own response. She'd been attuned to him from the beginning, and the emotions that flooded her now through the contact washed away any objections. The female in her surrendered to instinct and rose up to match the male. The cards never lied. This arrogant, overbearing, meat-eating wolf was her perfect mate.

But not here, not now, not under these circumstances. Reluctantly she broke the kiss. "We'll talk about this later," she promised him.

"I get her when you're done," Alfie said. Roderick snarled, and Alfie recoiled. "Hey. Just asking."

Darinda turned Roderick's head to face her. "Do you really love me?"

"Of course I love you. You're the only she I want."

"Would you do something for me?"

"Anything, darling."

"Open that window, stick your head out and take deep breaths."

He looked puzzled but did as she asked. Maybe, she hoped, the fresh air would clear his head. While Roderick cleaned the truth mist out of his nose, Darinda turned to Alfie. "Now. Down to business. Who hired you to kill Roderick?"

Alfie opened his mouth. Shut it. Ground his teeth. His whole body writhed, as if he sat on an electrical grid and not Aunt Letty's down coverlet. Darinda frowned. The truth spell shouldn't work this way. Either the influx of fresh air or the hex he carried must offer him a measure of resistance.

"Who hired you to kill Roderick?" she persisted.

He shrugged apologetically. "Can't do it, chickie. It's family."

"Which family? The Duquesnes?"

He started to nod but caught himself. "We already know about their coyote blood," Darinda said. "Technically you're not betraying anyone."

"You don't know this dog. He's bloodthirsty. Him and the other one. The both of 'em could kill me and not give a scat. I'd rather take my chances with you. You're tough, but you're no killer."

"But I am." Roderick turned from the window. His eyes had cleared. He avoided aiming them at Darinda. "Who's the other one? A human?"

"Wolf. Pure blood. The two of 'em been working together. They—" He clamped his mouth shut again.

Someone close. Darinda glanced at Roderick. He still wouldn't look at her. "We need names," she said. "Start with the wolf, if that's easier for you. Is it someone we know? A member of Roderick's pack?"

Alfie shuddered all over. Then abruptly Alfie was gone. A scrawny coyote crouched on the bed with a towel draped over his hindquarters. His gold eyes darted back and forth between the two of them. His tail was tucked firmly to his belly.

"As if that's going to help you," Roderick snarled.

"Actually, it does," Darinda said. "He can't talk in that form."

"He can bark. One for yes, two for no."

"Yes, there's that." She took a step toward the coyote. "Okay, we'll just go down the list. Who ordered this? Was it Ellis Duquesne?"

Alfie uttered two barks, the second clipped. He whined and shrank away from her. Roderick loomed on his other side. "Was it Bernadette Chase?"

Wait a minute, Darinda thought. He's not cringing. He's gathering himself—

Alfie sprang off the bed like a shot and leaped out the open window. The wards caught him briefly, but his momentum and the conflicting magics laid on him weakened their efforts. The wards snapped, spilling Alfie onto the ground two stories below. Darinda darted to the window in time to see Alfie climb groggily to his feet, shake himself, and stumble off through the garden, gathering speed as he moved.

"Crap," she said. "Roderick—"

She found herself addressing his jacket, pooled on the floor by the door. A trail of shed clothing led into the hall and down the stairs. Darinda hit the kitchen just as the doggy door swung shut.

For all he'd been through in the last half hour, Alfie was certainly covering a lot of ground. He'd found a thin track through the trees around Meadowlands and barreled down it like a hound of Hell was after him. Which, to judge from Roderick's hunting howl, wasn't too far off the mark.

Trailing them proved frighteningly easy. Her whole body had become a compass, magnetized to Roderick. Their heartbeats thudded in unison, his thoughts echoed in the back of her brain. Alpha mates had to be this way in order to guide the pack, he'd explained to her once.

But I'm not a wolf, she thought. Did that even matter, she wondered, when souls were determined to unite?

She had a better idea of where the trail was headed. If it stayed straight they'd come out on Kelly Drive, just above the river. No telling where Alfie'd go from there. Any populated area would work for him, since he could pass for a dog. Explaining the wolf would be harder.

She heard yelps from up ahead. Roderick had caught up with him. Then a scream, and the shriek of brakes, and a hideous thump, followed by nothing.

Roderick! She batted branches aside and ran faster.

She broke out of the trees at the edge of Kelly Drive. The black wolf stood frozen at the curb. Up and down the Drive cars came to sudden screeching stops. A Camaro straddled the center line off to her right, trailing glass from a shattered headlight and with a huge dent in its grill. Beyond lay a crushed russet lump that until recently had been Alfie.

"It ran right in front of me," the Camaro's driver wailed to the other stopped drivers emerging from their vehicles. "Goddammit, my *car!* Will insurance cover this? Does anybody know?"

Among the deadlocked traffic Darinda spotted a police car. The officer strode purposefully toward the Camaro. She sank her hand into the thick fur of Roderick's ruff and tugged gently. Unnoticed, they slipped away.

Chapter 17

"That's it, then," Roderick said. "Our only lead a dead end. So to speak."

Darinda peered into her teacup. Roderick had a bracing mug of broth. Upon their return to the Meadowlands kitchen he had pulled on his slacks, but remained shirtless and shoeless. She absently rubbed a scratch on her cheek, where a twig had protested her blunder through the trees.

"We've made some progress," she pointed out. "We've eliminated Ellis Duquesne from the suspect list. We might as well eliminate Coraline. She had her reasons for wanting to marry you, and they included keeping you alive. I wouldn't have wished that fate on Alfie, but with him gone the attacks may stop."

"Doubtful. He gave the impression they'd keep coming no matter how many coyotes we went through." He batted his mug between his hands, like a cat with a ball of yarn. "I've only one move left. Return to England."

She looked up. Dismay pierced her sharply. "You can't."

"Why not? My only reason for being here was to marry Coraline, and that's off. Unless you can think of a good reason for me to stay."

"Yes, I can. You heard Alfie. There are two of them after you, and one is a full-blood wolf. The cards said the killer was someone close to you. We've eliminated all the wolves you know in Philadelphia. The only ones left are your immediate family. If you go home now, you'll be walking right into a death trap."

"All the more reason to take the fight to them. Go for the throat. It's what we Chases are best at."

"I can't let you do that. Alfie never gave us a gender. It could be any one of them. Your mother, your siblings, who knows how many other relatives you've got. I won't let you throw your life away in some foolish frontal assault. You don't even know who the enemy is." "It won't come to that if you're with me."

"We need some kind of—what?"

"Come with me. Best we present a united front. Make them think twice about a strike."

She blinked, unsure she'd heard him right. "You mean, to England?"

"Right through the front door of Chase Manor. That's sure to provoke an attack." His canines showed. "Then we've got them."

Darinda put her head in her hands. "Please don't do this to me. It's been too long of a day."

"I don't see any problem. You're my bodyguard as well as my mate. You belong at my side."

"I'm not your mate."

"You could be. You need merely say yes. Did I propose? I'm not entirely sure."

"That doesn't count. You were under a spell."

"A truth spell. I meant every word of what I said up there."

"Even the bit about being a cowboy?"

"Don't get off the subject. You want me. Why else would you still be here?"

Because I'm an idiot, she thought. Aloud, she said, "I swore to keep you safe. I intend to honor that regardless of my personal feelings."

"Your reading promised me love and happiness. When do I get that?" He leaned across the table. "And from whom?"

"Not from me," she said, too quickly. "We barely know each other."

"I was ready to marry a woman I'd never met. At least I like you most of the time."

"Way to flatter a girl, Mr. Romance. No. I might consider a trip to England in order to solve this case. I might even consider going to bed with you now, if only to get you off my back. But I won't be your mate. I'm a witch, you're a werewolf. It would never work."

"I don't see any reason why not."

"I can see plenty. I'm a vegetarian, for starters."

He shrugged. "We all have our little faults."

"And you're a pompous jerk."

He shrugged again. "You're snooty and repressed."

"I am not!"

"You most certainly are. All that yapping about oaths and vows is just a smokescreen. An excuse to avoid involving yourself with the inferior masses. Witches aren't solitary by nature. They're snobs."

"That is so not true."

"I beg to differ. You can lie to yourself or even to me, but not to this." He tapped his nose. "I annoy you and upset you. I have from the first. Yet here you sit. I also frighten you, in a way you've shown with no other wolf. What is it about me personally that frightens you so?"

"I'm not afraid of you," she snarled, and to prove it lunged across the table, grabbed him by the hair, and dragged his mouth onto hers.

She poured everything she had into the kiss. She was going to show this puffed-up son of a werebitch the price of insulting a witch. She thrust her tongue inside his mouth without asking permission. Submit to this, dog boy, she thought.

He did. His mouth relaxed against hers and he all too willingly accepted everything she could dish out. This definitely wasn't going according to plan, but she'd committed to it now and wouldn't break it off.

The kiss went on. And on. Darinda lost track of the seconds. At some point she surrendered to his return assault on her tongue without even a whimper of protest. The taste of him thrilled her, like the savor of forbidden sin.

When the air finally ran out and they broke apart, Darinda had all but lost track of where she was. She was surprised to find her upper half sprawled across Letty's kitchen table, with Roderick's hands fisted in her hair. He grinned into her eyes, completely unrepentant. Smug, beautiful jerk.

She tried to wriggle back onto her chair, but he caught her by the shoulders and wouldn't let her escape. "I believe you mentioned sleeping with me earlier," he said.

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" Now that he was no longer promised to Coraline, the prospect held appeal. Quite a bit of appeal. Why not indulge herself, just this once? She'd put up with him for days. She deserved something. "All right. I'll go to bed with you."

"Not good enough."

"What?"

"I want more than an empty romp from you. I want what I was promised. Love and happiness. You're not the only one who wants the fairytale ending."

"You need to brush up on your fairy tales. We're the bad guys. The wicked witch and the big bad wolf. We don't get the happy endings."

"You've been reading the wrong stories." He kissed her doubts away. "In mine you climb up onto my saddle and we ride off into the sunset."

She grinned gently against his lips. "You don't ask for much, do you?" she murmured. "Just everything."

"We won't settle for less. That's a were's nature." His smile echoed hers, but with a rakish edge. "And a witch's too, I'd wager."

He eased her off the table and into his arms. He eyed the kitchen floor, then shook his head. "No, let's do this right." He took two steps and stopped. Alarm flared up in his eyes. "You're not going to change your mind halfway through again, are you? Or fling me into a wall?"

"No." She twined her arms around his neck. "I swear."

"All right, then." He carried her up the stairs.

* * * *

Only when Roderick had laid her down on his bed did Darinda feel a stir of trepidation. In spite of his accusations, Darinda wasn't a virgin. Roderick, however, fell far outside her experience.

Human males she could handle. They were almost pathetically easy to manipulate, even without her magic. The one vampire she'd gone out with had proved petulant and demanding, not to mention bitey. None of those experiences had provided much satisfaction. As for werewolves...

She'd heard the stories, mostly from Peri. They included tales of excessive roughness and brutal attacks from the rear with biting and scarring as side effects. She couldn't stop a nervous little shiver when Roderick slid in beside her. "I might need protection," she muttered.

He sat up, concerned. "Are you in heat?"

"No, not that. I'm spelled for that and for diseases. I'm worried about..." She waved her hands vaguely, indicating his teeth. "I'm not as strong as a were female. I'm not sure I can measure up physically."

"Ah." He kissed her forehead. "You'll be fine. I've been with human shes before. I promise to leave you relatively intact."

"Wait a minute. Relatively?"

He stopped her with a werewolf's kiss, the tip of his tongue skimming over her lips. From that he slid effortlessly into the human version, lips to lips, tongue teasing hers. He nipped lightly on her lower lip. "So far so good?" he murmured.

She nodded, unwilling to trust her voice. He had a stiff, wiry pelt on his chest, his arms, his back. His back hair yielded to her caresses, but she wanted to feel that chest hair on her skin. She reached for her blouse. Roderick stopped her. He opened the buttons one by one, then nosed the fabric aside and first sniffed, then licked, between her breasts. Darinda couldn't help giggling.

Thank Hecate her bra had a front clasp. Roderick took his time undoing it. He repeated the process with each breast in turn. Sniff. Get the scent. Then a leisurely taste. His warm tongue rasped against her skin, triggering every sensitive nerve ending it washed over. At this rate she'd be half insane before he even made it to her waist.

He was hunting her, she realized. Stalking his prey. She ran her hands up and down his back and read the truth of him in his own quivering skin. It was her heart he was after. His own was hers for the taking. Her determination to remain apart wavered before his relentless attack.

He'd reached her waist. Sniff. Snuffle. His tongue explored her belly button. Darinda clutched his butt and pressed him down hard against her hips. The wolf crouched behind his fly, stiff with excitement and eager to leap.

She dragged at his waistband but he stopped her again, capturing her wrists in his hand and pinning her arms over her head. "Not so fast," he said against her belly. "I waited a long time for this. I intend to savor every second of it."

"Roderick." Darinda barely recognized her own voice. It sounded as ragged with hunger as any wolf's growl. "Hurry. Please."

"All in good time."

Since his one hand was now occupied, he used his teeth as well as his other hand to work her slacks down below her thighs. Her most vulnerable spot lay exposed. The wolf poised over her then leaned in. Sniff. She shuddered. Lick.

She rocked against him, crying out, held by his hand on her wrists and his arm on her chest and the rough hot tongue that insisted on learning the outs and especially the ins of her. Helpless and reveling in it, her senses exploded in a sudden burst that left her limp. Roderick released her wrists.

"Are we having fun yet?" he asked.

Darinda sighed out a moan. "When do I get a turn?"

"The alpha male feeds first. It's tradition."

Well, traditions were made to be broken. She fumbled at his fly and reached inside. Now it was his turn to gasp and growl. Following his lead, she didn't withdraw it for a look, but instead indulged herself through touch. Her fingers measured the length of him, prodded his steely hardness, tugged. He made a noise between a growl and croon and closed his teeth on her shoulder. She let go and so did he. He licked the bitten skin in distracted apology.

"Roderick," she breathed. "I want you in me. All the way."

"We're getting to that," he said unsteadily. "Be patient."

She couldn't be patient. She'd kept herself apart too long already. Solitude was not strength. To open herself to another, one whose trust in her and need for her pounded in her soul, there lay the true test of strength. The individual was strongest when acting as part of a whole.

She cupped her hands around his face and dropped the last of her shields. The truth of her emotions, her self, passed from her into him like a slide of a fine wine into a goblet.

He lurched upright at the contact, but didn't let her go. They'd already enjoyed a casual link, so the shock of her revelation was not as abrupt as it might have been. He rolled with it and came up eager to grasp this new prey in his jaws. *What's this?*

Magic. The heart of the witch.

It tastes delightful.

You like it? Her surprise quivered between them. Most men run away screaming at this point. Too much honesty.

You'll find I'm not some weak, skittery ape. What power! It's delicious!

It's why we make oaths, and are strict about keeping them. If we let it loose, there's no telling what could happen. I'm not hurting you, am I?

Are you joking? Quite the opposite. The wolf charged in for the kill.

Somewhere back in the physical world his hands tore away the rest of her clothing. Hers dragged at his pants until she'd exposed what she wanted most. He surged full tilt against her, physically and otherwise. As he plunged into her, her mind twined about his, bringing both to the happy ending they'd craved for so long.

* * * *

Afterwards Darinda languidly stretched aching muscles and groaned slightly through a smile that showed no signs of diminishing. She tugged on her arm. Roderick hitched his body to free it without relinquishing his hold on her. "It's still there," he assured her.

"I wasn't sure. You bite hard." She checked her arm, found it whole, and nodded. She draped it around his neck. "So how do I measure up?"

"To what?"

"To wolves. I've never been with a wolf before."

"Neither have I."

She would have sat bolt upright if he hadn't been holding her. She jerked in his arms instead. "You what?"

"I've never been with a wolf," Roderick said mildly. "Too much risk of the mate bond. Mother considered me more valuable to the pack as unmated and available. Good for trade." His lip lifted briefly. "It's what turned me to humans. Well, I wasn't about to stay celibate."

"No, of course not," she said tartly.

"It could be worse. Tamra and Diane have to be locked up during their heats. No loose litters in our family. The Queen Mum won't tolerate the competition. Tamra's still virgin, as far as I know. That explains her delightful temperament." He grinned down at Darinda. "At least you didn't have that failing."

Darinda giggled. "Told you."

"As long as there are no bats in your past."

"Just the one, and he couldn't. A lot of them can't. Dead, y'know."

"As I suspected. I just can't understand the human attraction to them."

He leaned back with a contented sigh and stretched his full length on the bed, pressing himself comfortably against her. Darinda climbed half atop him and rubbed her breast against his prickly chest fur. It felt even better on her skin than she had imagined it would.

"Are you sure I didn't hurt you?" she asked. "The magic can get a bit rough when it's unleashed like that."

"Quite sure." He chuckled. "That was quite a ride. I can't wait for the next round."

"If you think you can take it."

He bared his teeth and lifted her all the way on top of him. She yipped as his wolfhood stirred against her, scenting its favorite prey. "Why don't we find out?"

* * * *

She didn't notice any difference then. Not during their second romp, nor during dinner, nor at any time during the long, serene night she spent happily curled at his side. The noticing came with the morning. Darinda blinked her eyes open to soft dawn sunlight and an odd but fully pleasant sensation humming at the bottom of her mind. Like the touch of another's thoughts, only richer, strange and familiar at once.

Puzzled, she tried to shut it down. It wouldn't go away. Alarm burst in on her. Could this be another mystic attack? Cautiously she prodded the alien, intimate presence.

Her probe awoke Roderick. He stretched and yawned and immediately tried to climb on top of her. "Good morning to you too," he murmured against her neck.

"Stop. Don't. Something's not right."

He came alert at once, his posture going to from passion to protective in one overall tensing of muscles, "In the house?" he hissed.

"In me." She shut her eyes briefly, opened them again. She was no longer fully alone in her head. She gathered her defenses and stabbed at the intruder.

Roderick yelped. "What did you do that for?"

"I didn't do anything. I—"

The presence in her head flared up and made itself known with a vengeance. Her hand flew to her mouth. "It's you. You're in me."

He shook his head as the sting receded. "Not yet, but if you'd like…" He stopped. His eyes seemed to turn inward. Unexpectedly, he smiled. "Well. This is interesting."

"No, it isn't. It's scary. Any link we had last night should have dissolved after...well, after. You're still there."

"I think I know what you mean. I feel like someone's scratching me at the base of my tail. Rather pleasant, actually. As if...Lycaon bite it, you don't suppose...?" He stared down into her eyes, wonder dawning in his own. "Mate bond."

Her heart stuttered once. "But I'm not were. You said that couldn't happen outside your own species."

"It shouldn't. That's why humans are deemed safe for romps. But then, you're not entirely human, are you? Your magic's bridged the gap. I knew it. You *are* my chosen mate."

"But that's not—"

His expression clouded over. "Not what?"

She thought of the Queen of Hearts and the King of Spades. She considered his strength inside her, shoring up her own. His assets countered her flaws, and vice versa. Maybe such a fate wasn't as horrible as she'd first imagined. "Not so bad," she finished.

Roderick relaxed. "Well, this is certainly unexpected, but I can't say I'm upset. Are you sure there's no wolf in your line?"

"Positive. Mom's a witch through and through. Her bloodline's probably purer than yours. Witches are picky when it comes to mates."

"What about your father?"

Darinda snorted. "If you knew Dad you wouldn't even ask that. No, he's human. Even he used to joke about it."

"I find it hard to believe that any witch would be satisfied with a mere human as a mate. Didn't you just say how picky you are?"

"Dad's not a wolf and neither is Mom. This thing between us has to be some aberration. My magic's a little mixed up just now."

He smirked. "I wonder what could have brought that on."

"Don't flatter yourself." His presence inside her had already settled in and made itself at home. How quickly she'd adjusted to it. Frighteningly so. "How long does it last?" "Mate bonding? For life. We stay together and raise a litter. That's the point."

She stiffened. "So I'm your property now?"

"Of course not. You're my mate. We're equals in this. It's up to us together to provide for the pack and keep it strong. If anything..." He looked away from her. He didn't quite wince. "If anything, I'm yours. Ultimately it's the shes who decide who sires their pups." His voice dropped to a desperate whisper. "Don't let on."

Darinda felt the smile bloom on her face. "No one will hear it from me. So…we're destined to start a pack together. I'm not sure I can do that. Biologically, I mean. Genetically, there could be problems."

"No, there won't. Uncle Todd—"

Again he broke off. This time he actually blushed. "Uncle Todd what?" Darinda prompted. Roderick mumbled something. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

"I said, Uncle Todd married a human." He spat out the words in a rush. "Don't you dare smirk. He was excised from the Registry for it. It isn't something we're proud of."

"So the Chase line isn't as pure as you've been beating me over the head with." Darinda smirked anyway, right into the face of his glower. "And they had children?"

"Scads. Humans aren't bound to a twice-a-year breeding cycle. They had to leave England. Mother drove them away. I think they moved to Montana."

"Where he became a cowboy." Darinda's smirk softened into a tender smile. "Didn't he?"

"Mother forbade contact," Roderick growled. "We've kept in touch through the Internet. Mother doesn't know."

Her smile vanished quickly. "When your mother finds out about us, what's going to happen to you?"

"I don't sodding care." He dragged her against him and kissed her fiercely, sparking her own full-hearted response. When he finally let her go, both were panting. "We're mates now. Her, the coyotes, whoever wants to kill me, none of that matters. Whatever comes at us, we'll face it, and we'll win." * * * *

The flight from London seemed hurried in its touchdown, as if it couldn't wait to expel its passengers. The first off the plane didn't wait for expulsion. She didn't wait for anything. Customs caught one look at her eyes and rushed her through without argument. Security didn't even ask to see her passport. Once free of these annoyances, she plowed through the crowds like a steamer through the ocean. Even the dullest, most belligerent of the monkeys recognized the she-wolf in their midst and skittered out of her way.

"They'd better be here," she snarled under her breath. "Snap it up," she barked over her shoulder.

The young man in the too-roomy suit had finally found a cart for their bags. He scurried desperately in her wake. She pounded arrow-straight for the exit and never once looked back. The boy maneuvered through the mass of monkeys with a quivery voice and appeasing smile: "Sorry...sorry...sorry..."

Bernadette Chase had arrived in America.

Chapter 18

Darinda had just emerged from the shower when the downstairs phone rang. Roderick picked up. She thought she heard him yelp. A stab of hot rage pierced her through their link before he suppressed it. She cracked the bathroom door in time to hear, "Absolutely not! Who the bloody hell does she think she is? No, I will not—" The rest deteriorated into a spate of barks and snarls. She marveled that the phone didn't melt in his hand, or shatter when he slammed the receiver down.

She started down the steps just as he started up. They met in the middle. Before Darinda could get a word out Roderick said, "Mother. She's coming here."

"Your mother? Here? You mean to Philadelphia?"

"I mean here, to this house. That was Aunt Letty. Mother arrived at the airport an hour ago. Eugene had to go get her. The Queen Mum insists on an audience, now. She'll be here in twenty minutes. Less, if Eugene's driving."

Darinda glanced down at the bath towel wrapped around her body. "Short notice."

"She likes to take her prey unawares. We're lucky Aunt Letty was able to slip us a head's up." He herded her back up the stairs. "We don't have much time."

Darinda scrambled to keep ahead of him. One stumble and he'd run her down. "She knows about me, right?"

"She knows about the death threats, the bodyguard bit, everything. She knew when I phoned her the other night. Someone's been keeping her apprised. Probably Eugene. Brown-nosing bastard."

"There you go being paranoid again." Darinda dropped the towel on a chair and yanked on underwear. "Your cousins checked out."

"As far as murder goes. This is everyday politics." He pawed through her closet and pulled out her tan slacks and the snug russet pullover with the brocade design. "Do you have anything dressier than this?"

"Only the gown you bought me, and that's a bit much for this time of the morning."

"This will have to do, then." He thrust the clothing at her. "It had to be Eugene. He's low rank. I wouldn't put anything past him."

She pulled on the slacks and the sweater. "She can't know that we've, well, you know."

"She's aware we've been alone together in the house for several days, that I have—had—a penchant for human partners, and I've broken the engagement she arranged. She's bright enough to tot up the score on her own. She doesn't know the Duquesnes deceived us or that Coraline's a coyote, or that you're my mate."

"When are you planning to spring that on her?"

"The minute she walks through the door." He grinned, and the look was scary to see. He was indeed his mother's son. He tugged at her clothing to get the fit just so then passed her her hairbrush. He himself made use of her comb. "She'll charge in with fangs bared. We want to look our best for the assault."

"You expect me to-"

"Stand by my side, where a mate belongs. No warning, eh? See how she likes it."

"I meant," Darinda said, "do you expect me to use my magic on her if things get ugly? Which is sounding more likely by the minute."

"That won't be necessary. She's my mother. If anybody's going to rip her throat out, it'll be me." If she'd taken his smile for scary before, she discovered now how far off she'd been. "A wolf can only take so much."

To cover her misgivings, Darinda attacked her hair and got it into a semblance of decency. "Let's keep the bloodshed to a minimum, huh? I hate having to dish out physical violence before I've had my tea."

"You haven't met Mother. Five minutes and you'll be looking for a wall to slam her into."

He stiffened. Darinda got the impression of ears pricking. Seconds later she also picked up the sound of a car in the drive. "Eugene," Roderick said. He gave her outfit a final tug, straightened his shirt collar and checked his cuffs, and took her arm. She barely had a chance to snatch up her everpresent shoulder bag. "Show no fear. She thrives on it. Here we go."

They descended the stairs together. Before they reached the door it swung open. Eugene poked his head inside. "Hey, Rod." He spotted Darinda and lost his watery smile. "Lycaon help us. Rod, shove her in the closet or something before—"

There wasn't going to be any "before," because the entrance of the rest of the pack cut him off. Darinda needed no introduction to the she-wolf in the lead. Those were Roderick's eyes boring a hole through her skull, Roderick's mouth twisting up into a snarl of loathing. She was shorter than Darinda had expected. Her eyes came level with Darinda's chin. Somehow one missed the lack of height in the face of all that presence, which seemed to expand to take over the room. "What's *that* doing here?"

"Now, Detty, you promised you'd be nice." Aunt Letty entered in a servile crouch, reduced to subordinate status in her own den. The look she sent Darinda behind her sister's back was equal parts welcome and apology. "This is Darinda Lowell, Roddy's bodyguard. We told you about her, remember?"

Letty took another step then was halted by the rigid line of Bernadette's back. Unnoticed, or perhaps ignored, one last wolf slunk in. Nearly as tall as Roderick but far more spindly, he had the Chase features but softer, unfinished. This, Darinda deduced, would be Roderick's younger brother. She dredged his name out of her memory: Orrin. He shot her a glance then looked down at the carpet. Eugene, equally unnoticed, silently shut the door.

"The witch," Bernadette said, combining acknowledgement and dismissal in two snapped syllables. Darinda felt her hackles rise. She had no chance to retort, because Bernadette had already directed the full force of her attention to her son. Her smile was anything but motherly. "Roderick."

Roderick stood unbowed. Un-submissive. Annoyance flashed in Bernadette's eyes. He returned her smile in kind. "Mother. What brings you to America?"

"You know bloody well why I'm here. I went to great lengths to find you a suitable mate. If you think I'll stand by while you cast that aside for some silly little simian chit—"

That's it, Darinda thought, and readied her air geller. Attuned to her emotions, Roderick smoothly stepped in front of her, blocking her spell. "I see you've not been fully apprised of the current turn of events. Coraline Duquesne is far from suitable. I'll leave it to Ellis to explain to you why. As for Darinda, she is neither simian nor a casual fling. Darinda is my mate."

Every other wolf in the room stopped breathing. Bernadette stood in mounting fury, the rest in mounting panic. Eugene whimpered. Aunt Letty elbowed him sharply. "Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I could certainly go for a good cup of broth. Darinda, would you come help me in the kitchen, dear?"

Nothing doing. She'd edged out from behind Roderick and had the bitch dead in her sights. Bernadette's yellow glare held enough venom to boil a king cobra alive. Roderick's tension vibrated painfully along her nerves. His emotions, more so than her own, prodded her to attack. On some level Darinda recognized this. Another, more primitive level urged her to stand by her mate and strike down the common enemy that threatened them both.

Both weres quivered on the verge of shifting. There'd be definite bloodshed between them unless Darinda struck first. That she'd take a healthy measure of satisfaction from it was purely incidental.

Except Letty stepped between them and ruined her aim. "Please," Letty said. "We're all upset over all that's been happening, and Detty and Orrin have been on a plane for hours. We could do with a minute to catch our breaths."

"Not with *that* in the house." Bernadette said. "Apes embroiled in our affairs. The *idea*. Roderick, I've turned a blind eye to your escapades for far too long. The marriage was supposed to fix all that. I suppose a portion of this debacle is my own fault for indulging you. That ends now. We can still salvage this. Get rid of your chew toy"—she spat that toward Darinda— "and get Ellis Duquesne in here *now*. We've got pack matters to resolve."

Roderick's lips pulled back. He surged forward. Aunt Letty planted herself firmly in his path. "Oh no you don't," she said, with a force that surprised both Darinda and Roderick, and caused Bernadette's eyebrows to climb. Eugene whimpered again. "Either of you. Not in my house. Detty, dear, why don't you have a seat? You too, Roddy, there on the sofa. Let me get you something. Darinda, be a dear and give me a hand in the kitchen, would you?"

Her look was half order, half entreaty. Bernadette appeared ready to jump at somebody, and Letty was closest. Darinda touched Roderick's hand, nodded fractionally at the sofa, gathered up her simian dignity and strode into the kitchen, with Letty padding at her heels. Bernadette made a comment Darinda deliberately pretended not to hear.

Aunt Letty wasted no time. She shut the door and told Darinda, "I'm so sorry, dear. You have to go."

"I can handle her."

"Yes, I'm sure you can. That's the problem." Aunt Letty licked her lips. "Detty can be difficult at the best of times. That's how alphas are. Especially solitary alphas. She wasn't so abrasive when she had Roddy's father to help shoulder the load. She feels she needs to run everything, and everyone. Roddy's the same way."

Darinda had to nod at that. "So I noticed."

"They also won't tolerate challenge. Your species doesn't matter. She's recognized a threat. Another alpha. That's why I had to have Eugene bring me and not Charles. It's a wolf thing. It can be a bit confusing to outsiders."

"No, I get it. Your sister's a queen bitch who's used to getting her own way and tromping on everyone else. Well, I don't stand for tromping. That's a witch thing. Generations of relatives getting burned at the stake will do that to a person. Roderick needs me. I won't just up and abandon him to that —that mother of his."

"You're going to. You have to. This is Roddy's fight. If you involve yourself in this, I'll be ages getting the blood stains out of the carpet. And Roddy will resent you for the rest of his life, because you took away his chance to settle rank with his pack leader. Oh, he'll never show it, of course, but it will be there, eating away at him. You do love him, don't you, dear?"

"Of course," she started, and broke off, startled. *Of course*. It had begun with that first handclasp, all the way back at the airport, and crept up on her like Springsteen stalking mice in the storeroom. The cards knew what her solitary, secretly lonely soul yearned for, and told her when she'd found him. As usual, it took her forever to catch up with what the deck already knew. She didn't even try to fight her blush. "It's that obvious?"

Aunt Letty smiled and tapped her nose. "It is to this old snoot. Oh, I know why you came up here and entangled yourself in a were war. It wasn't because we were paying you. The sparks that shot between you two! I thought you'd set the drapes on fire." "He doesn't want control of the pack," Darinda said desperately. "He said so under a truth spell."

"That's as may be. He does want you, and he's ready to take on his pack leader to keep you. Let him do it. Let him fight for you and for himself. You can't protect him in this."

"I can't just walk out on him. I won't."

"Yes, you can, and you will, better than a wolf could. You can turn your back on a rank fight and it won't destroy you. Humans are resilient that way. We're not. I always felt so sorry for Detty. I know what it cost her, running the family. But if she weren't alpha, she wouldn't be Detty. And Roddy wouldn't be Roddy. Do you understand, dear?"

She did. Hecate blast them all to hell and back, she did. She knew what burned in Roderick's heart better than what smoldered in her own. As much as he wanted her at his side, he wanted more to finally settle accounts with his alpha bitch of a mother. If she left him now, she could only guess what he'd think of her. But if she took this chance from him, what would he think of her then?

Voices rose in the parlor, mostly snarls. Letty gestured frantically at the back door. "Please. Do this for Roddy's sake, if not for me. Go now. I promise I'll call you when it's over."

Not without telling Roderick first. Darinda reached for his mind, and hit a seething mass of raw red fury she barely recognized. He fairly roared at her. This was not Roderick, her solicitous mate. This was the wolf, poised to attack, primed to kill. She flinched involuntarily from the force of it.

What? Even his thoughtvoice had teeth.

I'm going. Faced with were reality, she had to concede Aunt Letty had a valid point. *I'll be back when it's over*.

Darinda!

She shut her mind against his mental howl and fled—yes, this was definite flight—out the kitchen door. By the time Roderick realized her intentions she'd got into her car and was backing down the drive. She spotted him rushing after her car with Letty grabbing at his arm. His dumbfounded expression accused her from the rearview mirror as she gunned the gas and put Meadowlands behind her.

He was a wolf, she reminded herself. Not a man, no matter what he looked like. She could love the wolf, but she would never try to tame him, or break him. For the best, she told herself. Do no harm.

The painful clenching in her gut, the horrible sensation that maybe she'd just made the worst mistake of her life, was not so easily left behind.

* * * *

Gone. She'd abandoned him. Run off with her tail between her legs like a gutless omega, or a human. She'd fled like panicked prey before the fangs of the pack.

He didn't hear a word of whatever Aunt Letty was yipping at him. He only felt Darinda's agony, like shards of glass grinding inside him. She had some silly notion her flight would do him good, for some reason. Lycaon bite it, *she* didn't have to fight Bernadette. She need only remain at his side, like a proper mate, as any true were would have known.

Perhaps he'd had been mistaken. Perhaps she was a monkey after all.

"Well." Bernadette came up beside him, a self-satisfied sneer on her face. "Your little primate's gone and left you. Weak, like all her kind. Certainly not worthy of you. Eugene's called Ellis Duquesne. He'll be here shortly. You'll forget all about the apes once you have a wolf for a mate."

He whirled on her, fangs bared, hair starting to the surface of his skin. Bernadette didn't even blink. She'd ruled the family for longer than his lifetime, and knew bluff from challenge when she saw it. "Oh, don't make such a scene. You wouldn't want to rip that lovely shirt." She turned her back on him and returned to the house.

Aunt Letty, at risk of maiming, put her hand on his arm. "Come inside, Roddy," she pleaded. "Darinda will come back. She knows a pack meeting is no place for a human. She'll come back to you, I promise. Let's go inside. I've got broth ready. This isn't worth shedding blood over."

So you say. He didn't speak aloud. He didn't trust his voice. He allowed his aunt to lead him inside, confident in the now-empty pit of his heart that someone was going to die.

* * * *

When Darinda walked into Set A Spell Peri took one look at her face and let whatever quip she'd been planning die on her tongue. "Pekoe and honey," she said instead, and went to put the kettle on the hotplate. "You okay?"

Not by a long shot. "I'm fine." Darinda plopped her shoulder bag on the counter. "They're holding a werewolf summit meeting. No outside species allowed." She shot Peri a significant look. "His mother's there."

"Ooch. The in-laws. Never a good thing."

"Especially if she's behind this." For once she regretted she wasn't a wolf. She could do with a good ripping snarl right now. "This is wrong. I should be there. I don't care how much sense Letty made. This is werewolves. It's not about sense. I should be with Roderick right now, and Hecate take the smug fleabag."

"So why aren't you?"

"His aunt didn't want major bloodshed in her house. I can't fault her for that. She's a tough lady to say no to." Darinda's anger seeped away. "And she was right. I can't fight this battle for him. It would destroy who he is. But dammit, you didn't see her. That Bernadette Chase is an uberbitch."

"Piffle. You could take her."

"Probably. That's why Letty insisted I leave. There've been too many death threats this week already. And don't you ever say 'piffle' again."

"Only if you listen to this. You know that sale we were talking about? Well, I mentioned it at Tina's and some of the other shop owners were there and they think it's a great idea and they want in. They want to make a day of it. Specials, entertainment, the works. A Philadelphia block party."

"Like South Street needs an excuse to party. Don't let my bad attitude fool you. That's a great idea. Who's in?"

Peri gave her a rundown of tentative partners. A couple of customers came in. While Peri took care of them, Darinda perched behind the counter and tried to occupy herself with hashing out the details of their now blockwide sale.

Of course, it didn't work. The hoped-for distraction eluded her. Her thoughts kept returning to Meadowlands, and the growing conviction she should return there as well. She was his mate. She had opened her defenses to him and allowed him to claim her. He had announced her as such. She shouldn't have let herself get shunted off like this, no matter how hard Letty pleaded. They should be protecting each other. Especially if Bernadette had come to Philadelphia with murder in mind.

"Hey, Dar?" Peri came up to the counter. She brought along a tall, willowy young man with startling green eyes in a bark-brown face. Darinda sat up. Few hamadryads ever came into the paved-over city. "This is Carson. Can you do a reading for him?"

"Sure." Darinda pulled her deck out from beneath the counter. "Poker okay?"

"Great." The hamadryad smiled. His teeth were the color of peeled bark. "I hate Tarot. So pretentious."

Darinda shuffled the cards. "I thought you folks could do your own readings. Breezes whispering through the leaves and that."

"I don't like what the leaves are whispering. I wanted a second opinion. Okay, so that means what?"

Darinda frowned at the card she'd dealt. The Queen of Hearts. The King of Spades followed, then three diamonds, then the two of clubs. She swept the cards off the counter. "Sorry. That's my personal reading. Let me try again."

Her second deal yielded the same results. She had the hamadryad shuffle. No change. Queen, king, three diamonds, then the dark began and persisted right up to the end. The Ace of Hearts burst through the black in defiance, but in the end love fell before death.

Peri had finished up with her customers. She wandered over. "How's it going?"

"Not so good for her." The hamadryad nodded at Darinda, then at the cards. "That is one ominous hand."

"Here. You shuffle." Darinda thrust the deck at Peri. "If it doesn't work this time you'll have to do the reading."

Peri shrugged, shuffled and cut the deck. Darinda dealt the first card. Queen of Hearts. "Why does it keep doing that?"

"Unfinished business," the hamadryad said. "It wants to tell you something awful bad."

"It's been telling me the same thing for a week, and I still can't figure it out."

The two of clubs came up. She stared at it. Slowly she dealt the next card. The two of spades appeared, black as inevitability. As always, the

cards knew what they wanted to say. It just took her a while to catch up. How long had this pattern been playing out without her seeing what sat right in front of her?

"Dar?" Peri waved her hand in front of Darinda's eyes. "Hello?"

"Goddess," she whispered. Then louder: "Oh hell. I know who's trying to kill Roderick. I think I even know why." She jerked her head up, panic in her eyes. "One of them's at Meadowlands right now. The whole pack's in danger."

"Who's Roderick?" the hamadryad said.

Darinda scrambled the deal and shoved the cards toward Peri. "Peri'll do your reading. It's on the house." She dug out her cell phone and had hit the first four numbers for Meadowlands before she stopped. Her mouth tightened. Determination swept through her, more powerful than the panic. She put her phone away. "No. There's still the other one, and he doesn't play by the rules. If I try to tip them off, we'll have a bloodbath." She darted out from behind the counter, toward the window and the wall. "I have to get back to Meadowlands. If I act fast I think I can stop it."

"You want backup?" Peri said.

Darinda picked up her weapon of choice. "Thanks, but I've got all the magic I need."

Chapter 19

She drove up to Meadowlands cautiously, like a deer entering a field during gunning season. Big Alex's guards hunched beside the fence across the road, their tails hanging at an uncertain angle. They must have had a runin with Bernadette. A big Lincoln sat beside Eugene's Buick, shiny and well-kept, worthy of an alpha. Ellis Duquesne must have answered Bernadette's summons. She wondered grimly if the other player in this drawing-room drama had taken advantage of the situation to invite himself along. With all his victims in one place, how could he resist?

She hoped this were true. It would certainly make her job easier.

She patted the shoulder bag flopped on the passenger seat. Magical weapon, check. Personal protection spells, check. Vow to do no harm, check that at the door.

The sound of her arrival alerted them, as she'd figured it would. Eugene stepped outside just as Darinda climbed out of her car. He looked anxious, with good reason. "You shouldn't be here."

"The hell I shouldn't." Darinda slammed the driver's door and circled to the passenger side. She hefted her shoulder bag from the seat and supported it in both hands. It sagged on her arm. "Is everybody still alive in there?"

"Uh, yeah, but it's tense. Rod and Bernadette are ready to rip each other's throats out. Having the Duquesne alpha here isn't helping. Mom keeps putting herself in between, trying to keep hackles down, but sooner or later—hey, did your bag just move?"

"Who else is here?"

"Nobody. Hey, don't!"

She barged right past him and into the house. "Nobody," she discovered from her initial glance, was a relative term to a wolf. Bernadette and Roderick stood practically where she'd left them, emotional fangs bared at psychological throats. Ellis also stood, but off to the side, and his stance was neither stiff nor aggressive. He was off his turf in the presence of the pack he'd tried to pull a fast one on and not at all happy to be there. Aunt Letty nervously circled the alphas, making quiet little whimpers of appeasement. No one paid her any attention. Eugene whined at Darinda's back. Rounding out the "nobodies" were low-rankers Orrin Chase and Cole Duquesne. Cole must have driven Ellis here, acting as beta in Albert's absence.

Darinda nodded grimly to herself. Exactly as she'd figured.

Bernadette recovered a split second ahead of Roderick. She cut in front of him. "What the bloody hell do you think you're—"

Darinda waved her arm. Bernadette was thrust across the room and into Aunt Letty's Barcolounger. "Sit. Stay," Darinda said.

Bernadette roared and struggled, but the solid air held her fast. Eugene practically howled in distress. Darinda edged aside and gestured with her shoulder bag for him to enter the room. He sidled past her and stood well away from her and close to Aunt Letty, who patted his back soothingly.

Darinda's glare burned each wolf in turn. None challenged her. Her eyes hit Roderick last. His grin held an accusatory edge. "Welcome back. Although you should never have left."

"Good thing I did. I know who's trying to kill you. Just one last thing." She turned on Bernadette again. "Any problems on your side of the ocean? Any little 'accidents' you can't explain?"

Bernadette bit at the air, as if she would puncture the spell. "Let me loose, you blighted ape!"

"Not just yet. We're all safer with you where you are. You most of all. You're a target too."

That stilled her. "Explain yourself."

"I thought this was just about Roderick and the marriage, but it isn't. It never was. It's a lot bigger than that." Darinda moved until she had the wall at her back and all the wolves in sight. She held her bag against her side, with one hand inside it. "You're a pack, with a rigid hierarchy. So who benefits if the alphas die? The obvious answer is the lower ranks. Two packs, two sets of dead alphas, two chances to move up the ladder. Which gives us two connected killers." She noted, with no surprise, that her suspects had maneuvered to stand together. She'd gotten here just in time. "You, Cole, and you, Orrin. The two low cards in the deck."

"Ridiculous," Bernadette snapped. "Monkey thinking. We don't-"

"Wolves don't," Darinda cut her off. "But coyotes don't play by wolf rules. Neither do half-coyotes. Am I right, Cole?"

Orrin wouldn't look at her. Cole did. He met her stare dead on, his eyes full of hate. Definitely not omega wolf behavior. "C'mon," Darinda said. "The Duquesne line has coyote in it. That's why they dropped out of the Registry. Coraline's half. What's your percentage? I know it's enough to negate your wolf instincts. Using humans to do your dirty work. Buying spells from witches. Thinking outside the box. Enough to make you Alfie's close relative, too. What was he, your cousin? Half-brother? No wonder I thought he looked familiar."

Bernadette uttered a strangled yelp. Clearly all this was news to her. She turned her fury on Ellis Duquesne. "Coraline's *what?*"

"Not mine," Ellis said hastily. "Nora had a litter before I married her. You know how lax those Wissahickon families have gotten. Coraline's *mostly* wolf. She knows her rank and follows her duties. Unlike some mongrels I can name."

With one expertly-timed glare he shot all blame, and attention, at Cole. He started forward.

The wicked-looking gun Cole pulled out from under his jacket stopped him dead in his tracks.

"I doubt if that's the gun that shot Albert," Darinda said. "You wouldn't be that stupid."

"No. We had to ditch that one. Too much chance of Charlie tracing it. Don't worry, this one's loaded with silver-plated bullets and they've all got spells on 'em. They'll even blow you away, witch-monkey."

"I have no doubt," Darinda said dryly. Her hand moved slightly within her shoulder bag. The bag moved slightly in response. "They certainly did a number on Albert."

"It *was* you?" Ellis's disbelief momentarily overrode his disgust. "How could you? Why would you?"

"It should have been you," Cole snapped. "You were at the top of the list. That's the trouble with using apes. No sense of smell to speak of. The monkey we hired mistook Albert for you in the dark. Oh well, miss one problem, solve another. Albert never liked me. He never trusted my coyote blood."

"With good reason," Darinda said.

"Yeah. How about that?" Cole snickered. "Just as well we got him out of the way."

"And what was I?" Roderick said. "A crime of opportunity?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Cole said. "You Chases are tough to get at. Too good at watching your backs. Then Orrin told me you were headed here, alone. Somebody tosses you a bone, you grab it and run."

"Orrin?" Bernadette turned on her youngest pup. "Orrin? You're in league with this beast?"

"You *shut up*!" Orrin exploded. His face flushed brick red and sprouted the beginnings of stubble. Defiance of the higher ranks did not come as easily to him as it did to the coyote-wolves. "Dried-up old dam. You don't tell me what to do any more. Yes, I'm in it. I've been in it from the start."

"How? There's been no communication beyond my own-"

"Email," Darinda said. "The Internet. I know the Duquesnes have a computer. I saw Cole using it the night Albert was shot. Later Roderick confirmed you had a system at home." Though she spoke to Bernadette, Darinda kept her eyes on Cole, the obvious brains and backbone of this lowrank rebellion. "Chat room, my butt. You were bringing your partner up to speed on the botched assassination. I remember being surprised wolves even used computers. You always struck me as traditionalists. Of course, a coyote wouldn't think that way. Coyotes are quick to take advantage of anything."

"First one in my pack to have an iPod," Cole confirmed. "And it's only the old farts who won't adapt to new ways. Ellis doesn't even know what a laptop is."

"Of course I know what it is," Ellis snapped. "It's what you pups use to cook up harebrained schemes like this. And after I took you in!"

"And treated me like scat," Cole shot back. "I'm lucky you let me sit at the dinner table. You're nicer to the strays in the yard. They get a pat on the head once in a while. It should've been you instead of Albert. Happy now?"

"I'll be happy when your throat's open," Ellis said and started forward again. Cole pointed the gun at him. Ellis froze. Roderick slid a step forward. Orrin yipped a warning, and Cole shifted aim. Roderick stopped.

"You can't shoot all of us," Roderick said

"No," Cole agreed, "just the ones who matter. Ellis and Bernadette. Maybe you too. These bullets are spelled, like the one that got Albert. A graze is enough to kill you. Ask the witch." "He's right," Darinda said. "I didn't bring enough cleanser. It would be best if nobody got shot." Her gaze hit Cole. "Is that a possibility?"

"Maybe," Cole said slyly. "It's leadership of the packs we want, along with all territory. If our dear alphas are willing to officially show throat, maybe we can strike an agreement."

"Submit? To the likes of you?" Bernadette's bark dripped derision. "You're not even a wolf. Half-breed coyote rubbish."

Orrin strode over to his mother and smacked her hard across the face. Easy enough for him to be brave with his alpha pinned to a chair. "Your days are over," he snarled at her. "You want to die right now? I'm good with that."

"If I could get up, I'd—"

"Be shot in two seconds," Darinda said, and Cole gleefully nodded. "That's why I'm not letting you up. We're going to do this without murder, if possible. So all you want is control of the packs?"

"And the territories," Cole said. "It's getting cramped out in Wissahickon. Coyotes breed faster than wolves. Oh, that's another thing. I'm taking Diane as my mate. Orrin gets Coraline." He snorted. "She probably won't even know the difference."

"Not Tamra?" Roderick said. "She is the heir apparent."

"And a full-on queen bitch like her mother. No thank you. I like my shes young and trainable. So," he addressed the alphas, "do we have a deal? Remember, these terms are not negotiable."

"Out of the question," Ellis roared. Bernadette's snarl spoke for itself.

"I get to kill this one," Orrin said, inclining his head toward his mother.

"Fine by me," Cole said. "I expected you dogs to be stupid. Actually, I was hoping you'd..."

His insolence died away. Finally, with Cole's attention split between Bernadette and Ellis, Darinda was able to reach into her shoulder bag and pull out her own weapon. She let the bag drop to the floor. It landed with a massive plop. Orrin and Eugene uttered twin whimpers. Cole just stared.

"What the hell's that supposed to be?" Cole said.

"This," Darinda said, shifting Stormin' Norman more comfortably into the crook of her arm, "is a dragon. Don't let the size fool you. He's the real deal. His flame's hot enough to melt silver bullets, and dissolve any little magic you might have on them. Your witch pals don't have anything that can beat dragon fire. I'd put the gun down if I were you."

"It's a bloody lizard," Orrin said.

The "bloody lizard's" backbone spines glowed red. Steam wafted up from his hide. Roderick edged out of the line of fire. "I can't control him once he powers up," Darinda said, "and he's in the red zone right now. Put down the gun and you should be okay."

"Bite my tail," Cole said. "You stupid ape. It might be worth a bullet to put you away."

Darinda shrugged delicately, so as not to set Norman off. "It's your cremation."

She prayed he was bluffing. She'd learned to read wolves, but coyotes were too unpredictable. Norman sensed her tension and hissed. His lashing tail thumped against her backside.

Cole fired.

A single second split into fractions. The bullet left the gun, headed for Darinda. Norman belched a blast of fire. The bullet and its magics were vaporized barely two feet from the gun barrel. The flame engulfed the gun, Cole's hand, then Cole. The young were became a bipedal torch. He fell to the floor and rolled frantically. His shrieks went off the scale.

"Roderick!" Darinda cried.

He moved with decisive speed, as if they'd rehearsed. He yanked the afghan off the back of the sofa and used it to beat at the flames enveloping Cole. They snuffed out with amazing quickness. That was dragon fire—bright and hot as hell but not long-lasting. But then, it didn't need to be.

Darinda nudged her bag with her foot. She needed both hands to calm Norman. "There's salve in my bag," she said to Roderick. "A big tin. I was afraid it would come to this."

Someone howled. Eugene? It sounded like his whiny voice. Orrin's eyes bulged in his moon-pale face. "Is he alive?" Darinda asked.

"He's breathing," Roderick said. He caught the tin Darinda kicked across the floor to him and began to slather salve. "Maybe not for long. Ellis, he's your pack. What do we do with him?"

Ellis had no answer. Events had moved too fast for the old-schooler. "Somebody call Dr. Clark," Darinda said.

"It's daylight, dear," Letty reminded her.

"Oh. Yeah. Right. We'll have to get him to Clark's office. I know he has non-vamp assistants."

"While you're about it," Bernadette said bitingly, "do you think you might see fit to let me go? Now that the danger's past and all that. If you don't mind."

"Oh, sure." Darinda waved her hand absently. Bernadette stood. She went at once to her younger son and struck him a cruel blow across the face. Orrin whined and fell to his knees. He huddled where he landed and whimpered like a pup.

Bernadette marched past him as if he no longer existed. She stopped beside Darinda. "Is it over, then?" she asked.

Darinda ran down the list of players in her head. "Should be. We've caught Cole and Orrin. Alfie's dead. The witches and the muscle were only hired help. I'd say this pretty much wraps it u—"

She never saw it coming. For a second she forgot she stood among wolves. They might look like they were human, but they weren't. Her distraction was weakness, and in that moment of weakness Bernadette struck like a snake. Her blow slammed Darinda into the wall. Her head cracked hard against the plaster. Norman hit the floor. A second later Darinda joined him.

* * * *

Bernadette stepped over the motionless body of the human on the floor. "Now," she said, turning on Roderick, "you and I have unfinished business."

She'd barely got the words out when Roderick leaped at her. Not in attack. He shoved his mother away and knelt beside his mate. Blood from a cut on her scalp poured across the carpet. Her breathing was thready, but her heartbeat firm. Her personal protection spells had deflected the full force of the blow and the broken neck Bernadette had intended.

From the corner of his eye he saw Bernadette wriggle free of her dress and drop to all fours. Though crouched beside Darinda, he'd angled his body to keep her in sight. Even overwhelmed with concern for his mate, he knew better than to turn his back on his mother.

He had no time to shift and match her change. His clothes would hinder him. She knew it too, the bloody bitch. She planned to administer a thorough public drubbing, if not dispatch him outright. He heard no mercy in her snarl. In all his life he never had.

Bernadette charged him.

Roderick scooped up Stormin' Norman.

The black she-wolf saw her jeopardy too late to stop her leap. Desperately she twisted her body in mid-air. She landed hard in a tangle of limbs. Before she could scramble up again Roderick placed Norman on her chest.

"Don't move," he said coolly. "He's rather cross with you just now."

Bernadette froze. The dragon's claws clutched her fur. Every spine on his backbone stood erect and glowed a murderous crimson. His sides pulsed in and out like a bellows, building up the flame.

Roderick stood over her, his hands in his pockets. "He does look angry, doesn't he? Probably burn your limbs off if you touched him. You might try your intimidation techniques, but I don't think they're going to work."

Bernadette's lips pulled back. Norman was not impressed. Steam boiled off him in ever-thickening waves. Bernadette's death glared at her through red, unblinking eyes.

None of the other wolves moved. No one was going anywhere near the dragon, not after what they'd seen it do to Cole.

Abruptly Bernadette shifted. Immediately Norman sank his talons into her flesh. Her bare skin beneath Norman's body darkened to an ugly red. "Roderick. Get this thing off me *now*. Do you hear me?"

Roderick didn't move. "I hear you. I've heard every word you've ever said."

Bernadette reached a tentative hand toward Norman. Norman hissed. She snatched her hand back, away from the heat. "Roderick. Get. It. Off. Me."

"You tried to kill my mate, and after she saved us all."

"She's not your mate. She's a stinking monkey."

"She's the dragon's mistress," Roderick said. "That gives him the right of first crack at you." He brushed hairs from his shirt front. "I can wait."

"Roderick!" Her voice rose. Not quite a howl. Not yet a whine. "I'm your mother."

"And you taught me well."

She shut her eyes. Her teeth clenched. The reek of burning skin became pronounced.

Bernadette lifted her head and turned it, exposing her neck to Roderick. Her body slumped in submission. Her arms and legs trembled in pain.

Roderick snagged the afghan and bundled Norman into it. The bitten thing was hotter than a witch's cauldron. He had to wrench it free. Norman came away with gouges of Bernadette's flesh trailing from his claws.

Step one achieved. He had the pack. However, unless he could defuse this blighted incendiary monster his reign would go down as the shortest in Chase history.

How did Darinda control it? He gingerly rubbed Norman's smoking belly. "Uh...good boy, that's a good dragon. You know who I am, you've seen me before. You smell her on me, don't you? Yes, you do."

His spines seemed to glow a bit less dangerously. All right, talk worked. What else? Think. The tank in the shop. Lettuce, chicken gobbets and charcoal. "Letty. Is there still a log on the hearth?"

At Roderick's instruction a trembling Letty broke off some bark and a couple charred pieces and passed them up to Roderick. Presented with a treat, Norman couldn't help taking a nibble. It must have agreed with him, because he took a massive bite of the blackened wood. "So you fancy pine," Roderick muttered. "I'll remember that."

Gradually Norman's back spines lost their deadly red and drooped from erect to half-mast. He had become both visibly and tactilely cooler by the time he finished the wood.

Roderick freed the breath he'd been holding. "Thank Lycaon you're not a cat."

He set Norman gently on the floor, beside Darinda. She hadn't stirred, and her face was far too pallid for his peace of mind. "Call Dr. Clark," he barked at Eugene.

Eugene gestured vaguely at the window. "Uh, Rod? Vampire? Daylight?"

"I don't give a bite if it's bloody high noon! Get him up here!"

Eugene leaped past him, toward the kitchen. The receiver fell from his hands twice before he got a grip on it. Roderick waited until he heard Eugene make contact before he turned to the rest of the wolves. And a sorry lot they were. Poor Aunt Letty looked about to faint. So did Ellis. This wasn't how pack succession was determined in his experience. Cole lay in a fetal position, either unconscious or dead. Orrin was gone. He must have fled while attention was focused on Roderick and Bernadette. A pile of rags that had been his clothing was scattered on the floor where he'd been, along with a puddle of urine.

Bernadette remained on the floor. She had not been granted leave to rise. "So what happens now?" she said flatly. "Do you intend to kill me?"

"No." He didn't smile. "Once Tamra learns you've been deposed, I won't need to. Get her out of here," he said to Letty.

Wordlessly Letty helped her sister up off the floor. She stooped briefly, to pluck up the tin of burn salve. She guided the silent Bernadette upstairs.

Finally. Roderick went to his knees beside Darinda. She still breathed, but all that blood... "You're not going to die," he murmured. "Not after all we've had to go through."

Ellis Duquesne cleared his throat. Roderick speared him with a murderous look. "You want a shot at me too?"

"No. Of course not." Ellis backed a step.

"Do we have any further business?" Roderick said.

"Um, no. Don't think so."

"All right, then. The wedding's off. I think we're all clear on that. It will be a long time before I consider any further alliance with your pack. Now get out. You're on Chase territory."

Chapter 20

Darinda awoke with a dull headache, to the sight of a smiling mouth with fangs too slender to be Roderick's. She lifted her hand to her throbbing skull and felt the bandage there. That clinched it. "Dr. Clark?"

"Yo, Lowell. Welcome back. There," he said to Darinda's left. "She's all right. Can I go now?"

A low rumble answered him. Mindful of her aching head, Darinda looked to her left. Roderick, in wolf form, lay beside her. She was in his room, lying on his bed. That toasty, solid weight against her other side was Stormin' Norman. The dragon gripped a wedge of burnt pine in his claws and snored peacefully.

Darinda shut her eyes. It didn't help her headache. "Okay. What went wrong?"

"Mother." Roderick had shifted form in order to speak. Clark made a sour face. Roderick made one right back at him and pointedly pulled the covers up over his hips. "She tried to kill you. She's been dealt with."

She kept her eyes shut. "Do I want to know how?"

"You've your dragon to thank. Seems alpha rank doesn't carry any weight with him."

"Not much does, outside of food." Darinda let her eyes crack open again and caressed Norman's spines. He sighed in his sleep. "Are you mommy's special guy? Oh yes you are."

"Oy," Clark said. "You got me out'a bed to hear that?"

"I suppose this bandage I have on is your doing."

"Right, blame me. There's a skull-sized hole in the wall downstairs with your signature on it. I followed the flow of blood through your head and there's no swelling or concussion. You are one hard-headed witch."

Roderick kissed her cheek. "That's what makes her special."

"Screw the both of you," Darinda muttered. She glanced beyond Clark, to the window. Memories began to filter back, as weak as the late afternoon sunlight on the glass. That fact took a moment to register. "Hey. The sun's out."

"Tell me about it."

"So how did you get here?"

"You want to know how I got here? Let me tell you. I'm down in my cellar, undead to the world, when two of Big Alex's goons bust in, roust me out of a sound sleep, bundle me up in a tarp and dump me in the trunk of a car, that's how I got here. Whoever it was let those mutts watch *GoodFellas* ought'a be shot."

She looked to Roderick. He shrugged. "They were here. I was desperate."

"Yeah. Thanks for the ride. Wait'll you get my bill."

"Okay, that answers me," Darinda said. "How's Cole?"

"That the wolf tartare? He'll need to change how he spells his name. Your hotheaded little buddy there did quite the number on him."

"But he'll live?"

"We think so, yeah. Whatever you slapped on him saved him. Still a lot of serious damage, though. Which I should be treating instead of my assistants, except *some*body insisted I stay here to look after his girlfriend. What part of 'She'll be all right' couldn't you come to grips with?"

Roderick glowered at him. "I wanted to be sure."

"And to hell with everything else, huh? Cripes, Lowell, where do you find these people? My assistants got Toasted Oats back to the clinic. If he makes it through the night, I'll try to get him to shift form. That should help with regeneration. Assuming he makes it, that is."

"If he makes it, send him to Ellis Duquesne," Roderick said. "He can ride home with Albert."

"If you say so. Am I done here? Finally?"

Roderick sniffed Darinda's bandage and nodded, satisfied. "Yes, you can go."

"Thanks, Your Majesty." Clark glanced at the window and the daylight beyond it, and shuddered. "Maybe after dark. You got a pantry or something? Maybe I can still catch a couple of hours." Roderick nodded toward the closet. Clark got up and climbed inside. "G'night," he said, and shut the door.

Darinda curved one arm around Norman, the other around Roderick. "Okay," she said, "fill me in. Starting with why your mother tried to off me."

"She had no choice," Roderick said. "You overpowered her. You, a human, a filthy ape, humiliated her in front of her pack as well as a rival alpha. She had to try to kill you to save face."

"But I stopped Cole. I saved her damn life!"

"Irrelevant. If you're to lead the pack with me, you need to think more like a wolf."

"I don't think I like that way of thinking. Is she...?"

"Confined to Lorraine's room, for the time being. Aunt Letty's looking after her."

"So she's still alive," Darinda murmured. "Do no harm?"

He sniffed. "I forced her to show throat to me before witnesses. I suppose it depends on your definition of 'harm.""

"What's going to happen to her?"

"I haven't decided yet. One of a string of decisions I'll have to make from here on out."

She rolled over to face him, forgetting the throb in her head. Her hand cupped his cheek. "This isn't what you wanted."

"No. I didn't want leadership of the pack. I only wanted you. Get one to secure the other, eh?" His fingers brushed the bandage that covered her scalp, and his mouth tightened at it. "I do still have you, don't I?"

"You never 'have' a witch. We go where we will." She snuggled herself more completely into his arms. "Right here is working wonders for me."

She expected a lick, but received a human-style kiss on the mouth instead. That worked all kinds of wonders, too. "I love you," he murmured against her lips. "Now hurry up and get better so I can show you properly how much."

* * * *

Three weeks later

Home is where the heart is, ran the old cliché. Though Set A Spell would always be Darinda's place, Meadowlands was growing into her home. Her love, and therefore her heart, lived here. All that green and the blooming spring flowers didn't hurt either. As she pulled up to the front door she waved to the gardener, a former employee of Big Alex's who also preferred park green to city grime. Rolfe grinned hugely and waved a soilstained hand at her in return.

A hired beta. Well, Roderick's ascension to leadership had been sudden, and he needed a second in command. Of course, Rolfe reported Roderick's every move to Big Alex, which kept the King Wolf mollified. Win-win all around.

Darinda was greeted by the sound of Aunt Letty singing in the kitchen. The "song" had no words to it, and rose and fell on gliding notes a human would have been hard-pressed to hit. "That's lovely," Darinda said. "Is that a pack song?"

"A lullaby," Aunt Letty said from the sink, and added pointedly, "for the pups."

"Roderick and I aren't formally married yet. All things in their time."

"You and Roddy are alpha pair of the Chase clan. The family isn't sure if you can breed. They'll be watching for a litter. A word to the wise, dear."

Darinda snorted. "Where is he?"

Aunt Letty snorted back. "Where he always is this time of day. As you already know."

That she did. The tender hum inside her head told her her mate's location and mood. He was only a little exasperated today. Business must be going well. She stepped through the kitchen door.

Roderick liked to move swiftly. Not only had he taken over Meadowlands, he'd had the back porch enclosed and turned into a sunroom, which he'd adopted as his office. The new room had wide windowsills, and Norman had appropriated the one nearest Roderick's desk. When the dragon couldn't be with her, he preferred Roderick's company. This had to be the oddest case of male bonding in her experience.

Ah. There was the source of the exasperation: Roderick's new laptop. He still wasn't fond of the screen, but with Emma's coaching was learning how to better navigate the system. No Chase wolf would get caught flatfooted by technology ever again. The coyotes had taught them something after all.

He leaped to his feet and had his arms around her before the kitchen door closed, as relieved to be away from the computer screen as he was to have her with him. She stopped his welcoming lick with a kiss. Save the tongue action for later, when it would do the most good. "And how was your day?" he asked.

"The usual. We're getting a lot more weres. Big Alex has been spreading the word. I have to go back after sunset. Come with me?"

"Will the cat be there?"

"No, Springsteen will not be there. He's not as bad as he use to be. Since he fought Coraline he's been, well, smug. He just hisses at wolves now. Doesn't even puff up his tail."

"Last time I went in he jumped me."

"He was just saying hello."

"With his claws?"

"You didn't have to lock him in Norman's tank. I don't think he'll ever forgive you. And speaking of whom..." She slid out of Roderick's arms and went to the windowsill. "Hi, baby, I'm home. Did you have a good day with daddy?" She lifted Norman into her arms. It took more effort than usual. A patch of dead skin peeled off beneath her hand. "Oh no, I was afraid of this. He's growing. I told you what would happen if you let him out of his tank."

"I want him with me. He's better protection than Rolfe. How big can he get?"

"Ever seen an elephant? They eat those. In two bites."

"I'll get him a new tank," Roderick promised. "If we can put one in near the desk."

"Daddy spoils you," Darinda told Norman, and laid him back on the sill. A minute shift in her inner hum alerted her to Roderick's mood. "You've got good news."

"Tamra and I have reached an accord. She'll oversee our interests at home, in my name, while I expand our ventures here in America. It's not the top position, but it ought to satisfy her."

"Can you trust her?"

"As much as I can trust any lower-ranked were. She knows if she wants to challenge me she'll have to come here, and I don't think she'll risk it. She has all the privileges of alpha status without having to defend the actual rank. With me here and her there, we ought to get on."

"What about your mother?"

The hum darkened for a moment before it smoothed out. "Mother's taking an extended holiday in Europe. Exploring the ancient Chase ancestral lands. I believe she's in Norway. Tamra keeps close tabs on her." His smile was brief and humorless. "She ought to enjoy a long life, as long as she never returns to the Manor."

Darinda didn't try to hide her shiver from him. Parts of werewolf culture would always rub her wrong. She got off the subject in a hurry. "I wish I had good news. Cole Duquesne is gone. He snuck out of the clinic sometime after lunch. Dr. Clark's assistant called to warn me."

Roderick dismissed the news with a snort. "He won't come here. He knows what's waiting for him." He nodded toward the dozing Norman. "He can't go back to Lupin Hill. Albert will rip him to pieces. I'm amazed he didn't kill the little bugger at the clinic."

"Albert wasn't told until after he'd been sent home. Dr. Clark's orders. Just because Clark's a vampire doesn't mean he wants to see blood all over his recovery room."

"If he has any brains at all, he'll go to his coyote kin in Wissahickon Gorge and stay way from wolves. Assuming even the coyotes will have him. We've seen the last of that rubbish."

"And Orrin?"

Roderick's mouth tightened. "Big Alex's people have no word."

She didn't respond. Three weeks was too long for a wolf to run lone, especially an omega in an unfamiliar country, and both of them knew it. Darinda would continue to light candles and send prayers into the night.

Aunt Letty poked her head into the office. "I'm hearing lots of chatter out here. Wedding plans?"

"Catching up on our respective days." Roderick slipped his arm around Darinda's shoulders and drew her close to his side. She responded by circling her arms around his waist. She was starting to like this werewolf territorial stuff. "We'll get to the wedding, never fear."

Letty sniffed. "You'd better. It's been three weeks. Time's wasting. Dinner will be ready in an hour. Make sure you wash your hands." She shot a glower at the garden. "And tell Rolfe to stay out of my hollyhocks." She slammed back inside.

"Hollyhocks?" Darinda said.

"Rolfe likes to dig. He must be getting territorial again."

"I'll say. I can't even get near the vegetable patch, and I planted it. Since when did we go on the clock?"

"For?"

"The wedding."

"That's just Letty. She's eager for puppies. When the time arrives, you'll be grateful she's here."

"She'll have to get in line. Mom's been waiting twenty-six years for Paul and me to make with the grandchildren. You want territoriality? You ain't seen nothing yet."

"Has she ever had to housebreak a werewolf?"

"Okay, that might fall outside her skill set. I'm sure she and Letty will come to some agreement. How about you and Charlie? Are you sure he's okay with you taking over his turf?"

"The city is Charlie's territory. He's overjoyed his mother has someone to watch over her. Meadowlands is ours, as long as Aunt Letty remains in our pack."

"Huh. Some pack. You, me, Aunt Letty, Rolfe and Norman."

"And our pups." He smiled ferociously. "Witch and wolf. Magic and were. Our line will rule this country."

"Whoa! Slow down there. I'm opposed to world conquest on principle. And nobody's turning me into a puppy mill. You get one to start with. Maybe two. Twins run in my family."

"Ron and Hermoine?"

"Not in this lifetime."

He chuckled. "Fair enough. That leaves just one thing." He took a deep breath and huffed it out. She thought she felt a brief shiver. "Darinda Lowell, will you marry me?"

"I thought we'd agreed to that already."

"I never officially asked. It's been rather hectic."

"You forgot?" Slowly, Darinda thumped her head against Roderick's chest. "Hecate's tits. I can't believe I forgot you forgot to propose."

"As long as you don't forget to say yes."

"Yes. Yes, I love you and yes, I'll marry you. But no taking over the world." She kissed him to seal the deal. He was quite good at human-style kissing. And quite a few other things. She broke the kiss to grin up at him. "We've got an hour before dinner. Want to sneak upstairs and make some magic?"

This time he kissed her, and knocked the breath right out of her lungs. On the sill Norman stirred, belched out a puff of smoke, and stretched himself to better catch the sun.

THE END

pterofan@yahoo.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pat Cunningham was born at the Jersey Shore and grew up in Pennsylvania. Corrupted by *Star Trek* and Marvel Comics at an early age, she began writing science fiction and fantasy stories, publishing over a dozen. Paranormal romance allows her to combine fantasy, romance, humor and adventure into one package. She currently lives in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. *A London Werewolf in America* is her first full-length novel.

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